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## VALLEY OF FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

*by the same author*

THE HEALING KNIFE  
A SURGEON'S DESTINY  
A RING AT THE DOOR  
BEAUTY FROM THE SURGEON'S KNIFE  
DONKEY SERENADE  
TWICE THE CLOCK ROUND  
RASPUTIN SPEAKS

# VALLEY OF FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

by  
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To  
BERYL ANNE





‘Who were my ancestors? Tamerlaine or his cross-eyed Vizier Knut; who pulled milk out of a wild mare’s udders with their lips and grew drunk as little foals and neighed among the golden tents of Tartary?’

*Adapted from a Caucasian Legend*



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## PROLOGUE



A man does not usually undertake a journey into the Caucasus in search of something less than gold, or oil perhaps. If he is a tourist or a mountaineer he may walk or climb the well-beaten track, look on the splendours described in his guide-book, and go away, 'having seen the Caucasus'.

This book has no such pretensions. I did not go into the forbidding ranges of the Caucasus as a tourist or a mountaineer. I had known its famous watering-places since childhood. I had gazed on the lofty peaks of the giants Elbruz and Bech-Tau, and after a bout of influenza or measles I had been taken on long walks to their foothills to breathe the health-giving air of the woodland pines.

Living as I did in the Caucasus, I grew familiar with its beauties. I was born to them. The long ridge of mountains was always there to the south. They pinned the horizon to the clouds and the thunders came rolling over the Caucasian plain where I had my home. I loved those hills as one loves familiar things, but I knew very little about them, beyond a train journey to the Vladikavkaz or Kislovodsk. Never did I think that one day I would have to undertake a journey into

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the heart of the mountains where there was neither road nor railway, that I would see the theatrical princes of Caucasus ambling about in their brilliant uniforms in the watering-places, in their homes among the eagles' eyries. Nor did I suspect that Shota, our servant, was anything but a town Georgian, for ever remembering tales and anecdotes. I liked listening to him, although at a tender age I was told by my parents not to believe everything he said. 'The Caucasians are the most beautiful liars in the world,' he himself had told me. He might have added that they were vain, extravagant, generous, and brave.

The journey that I am about to describe in these pages took place some twenty years ago. I made no geological observations, nor did I study the etymology of languages, or gathered old coins, or anything like that. I am not qualified to speak of what has happened during these last twenty years; but the mountains are very old, and twenty years, speaking geologically, can have made little difference to the Caucasus. Perhaps there are roads there now, better roads, along which motor-cars can travel from Tiflis to Erivan, and I believe the Soviet governments of the different autonomous republics have built hospitals and schools. There may be cinemas in the forgotten valleys and safety-razors and all kinds of modern appliances, and perhaps aeroplanes challenge the eagles' flight above the highest mountain in Europe, Elbruz, and perhaps the princes and knights and the warriors and all the strange folk that inhabited the crannies and the crags and the plateaux have become civilized. I don't know. But I know that whatever material changes may occur in the Caucasus, its people will remain the same. The 'best liars in the world', if you like, but also the most lovable mountain folk to be found in the world.

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Like the fishers of the sea, there is nothing mean about people who live in the mountains. In the presence of such majesty and grandeur the sons of men live brave and sometimes noble lives.

What is the Caucasus? Geologically the mountains belong to the ring that covers the centre of Europe and northern Africa, beginning with the Atlas Mountains, going on to the Pyrénées, the Alps, and the Carpathians. They are all of similar construction, but the ranges in the Caucasus are higher. Climatically the higher reaches of all mountains are the same, but the temperature in the foothills of the Caucasus varies a great deal from, say, that of the Swiss Alps. Places like Sochi or Poti on the Black Sea, standing at the foot of the hills, have a semi-tropical climate more like that of Sicily. But whatever the influences of climate may be, the difference between the inhabitants of Switzerland and the Caucasus are marked to a greater degree. In Switzerland the major racial divisions fall into French, German, and Italian sections. In the Caucasus the divisions, if they were honestly and accurately noted, would probably be something in the region of two hundred different races and some three hundred different dialects and languages!

Now, I'm not going to boast and say that I have seen all two hundred different specimens or heard three hundred different tongues during my voyage across the mountains, but I can say that I met a variety of folk nowhere else to be found in the world. I have stumbled from one valley to another and there found faces as white as a Scotsman's, only to go round the corner and bump into some Tartars. I have seen people who call themselves Christians but have never heard of Christ, others who announce themselves as citizens of Rome's long-



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lost empire. Everything seems to be in contradiction. There are languages here without alphabets, lost to the world, like the cities of Nineveh and Babylon. There are men who have come from distant parts of the globe, from Germany, from France, from Italy, from the Siberian steppes, from the Garden of Eden itself, and who set up settlements and elect their princes and have fought and loved in the hills for thousands of years.

It is as if, when God created the world, He found so many men over from each country and language that He decided to scatter them, to lose them somewhere in the world. Many of the tribes in the Caucasus might have dropped from the skies for all we know about them.

But I am not an anthropologist. I did not undertake this journey for some geographical magazine, and in any case I was quite unqualified at the time to make any sort of accurate observation that might aid in the scientific elucidation of these racial mysteries. The purpose of my journey I will tell later. For the time being let me indulge in the pleasures of unscientific speculation.

The Caucasus has given its name to the European man. All white-skinned folk are 'Caucasians'. Your true 'Aryan' must have come from there, or perhaps he never ventured out, but stayed there, giving only his name to the false prophets of racialism?

What else does the average man know about the Caucasus? He may know, for instance, of the oil-wells to be found there. That much he has been able to gather from his newspapers. If he has read his classics, he will remember Prometheus, the father of curiosity, the Greek Adam who stole fire from heaven and learnt the secrets of Zeus. Perhaps he will have heard of Colchis, the place where Jason came in search of the

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Golden Fleece? Let him come to the present day. Stalin—‘the man of steel’, sprang from the rocks to challenge the might of the Tsars, and to take fire and spread the International Doctrine of Marx. So the world that has ignored the Caucasus so long might profitably know what kind of men live there, what their aspirations are, their creeds and their beliefs.

Look on the map. You will see that the Caucasus is the centre of the world. It stands in the heart of Europe, Asia, and Africa—in the heart of the great mass of land that we have named and divided. Who knows but that the voice of Prometheus, bound to a lonely crag and still tortured by heaven's fire, may not cry out the secret and solution of the universe?

## Chapter 1

# THE KIDNAPPING

---

'We are powerless without fate's command.  
What I wish I have not.  
What I possess I do not like.  
The world is like twilight, everything tends to decline.  
The jug pours out only what it contains.'

From *The Man in the Leopard's Skin*,

by RUSTAVELI, Georgian poet, A.D. 1187

'The world is like twilight, everything tends to decline.' So wrote Rustaveli, Georgia's great poet, heir of poets and troubadours of the East, beginning with Omar Khayyám. So the world certainly seemed to me in March 1918.

I was in Baku, the city founded by the Mongols and called the Town of Winds at this time. It was a busy, industrious city, bringing 'naphtha', the raw oil, from the rich loamy ground. The dividends from the wells went to England, Russia, France, Holland; even Sultan Abdul Hamid had a large share in them. My own family owned a few of the richest 'borings'. All that is history now, like the yellowing shares of the Lena Goldfields. But in March 1918 Baku was occupied

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by the irregular forces of the newly constituted republic of Azerbaijan. There were so many newly constituted republics at this time, the Daghestan, the Armenian, the Georgian, the Lesghians, the Karbadian, the Chechen, the Mingrelian, and so on. Communities everywhere were constituting themselves into republics when Russia, 'the mighty and indivisible', fell under the strain of war and revolution.

Patriots sprang up all over the place in the Caucasus. Almost every tribe began constituting itself as an independent body. They had not liked the forced dependency on Russia, and now was a golden opportunity to carve for themselves a territory, design a flag, and call themselves a republic.

Baku was a bedlam. The 'best' people had left long ago, some to join the White Armies, some to Persia and India, and others scattered into Siberia. My own people were going to Bulgaria, and I was remaining to join a warship in the Black Sea.

The history of this time is so full of confusion that any attempt to sort out the various rivalries, the 'victories' and setbacks of the various causes, would only muddle the situation still further. It is sufficient to say that I saw Baku change hands at least a dozen times before I left it. First came the retreating Russian armies on the break-up of the Caucasian front. Then came the Turks, who massacred all the Armenians they could lay hands on, and after them came the Azerbaijanians, the nationalist little army that wanted, I presume, 'Azerbaijan for the Azerbaijanians'. The result of all these tussles was that none of the contending parties obtained Azerbaijan and the rich naphtha wells of Baku. The Reds stepped in later, on the pretext of settling a war that had broken out between the Georgians and Armenians. All very

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confusing; all very petty and without point, so it seemed at the time.

As a Russian I was left out of all these quarrels between good neighbours. I was the representative of an empire that had gone to seed; now the valiant Caucasians were each going to make a little nation for themselves, and neither the Turks, the Russians, nor the interventionist wars were going to stop them.

It seems that what these little nationalities really wanted was to be left in peace, and to have their own rather parochial government, although for some brief time Georgia boasted of a strong government and had its ambassadors posted in European capitals.

We shall come across these wars and quarrels again and again as I describe the journey across the mountains. Let me first explain the reason for that journey.

With the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky was compelled to give the Turks (allies of Germany at that time) the fine 'sanjaks' or provinces of Ardagan, Kars, and Batum. The Soviet withdrew its forces and the Turks marched in. The Turks, as I have said before, celebrated the return of this 'Turkish Alsace-Lorraine' by cutting off the ears of the Armenians, who during the Great War had sided with Russia, in the hope of getting autonomous rule from them. But it is the Azerbaijanians whom I have to thank most for my Caucasian journey. Their part in it was a very sad loss—a disaster for me.

Even in the days when the Tsarist police kept Baku in good order, it was not considered safe to let a girl go walking by herself of an evening. Not that it was dangerous, oh no, but the mountain braves had strange customs. Girls, especially

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beautiful ones, were kidnapped and carried up into the mountains, there to become wives of some princeling or humble shepherd. The raids did not take place in broad daylight, and as a matter of fact the Caucasians, for all their valour, found it difficult to abduct a woman from the centre of a large European town. They had many more agreeable ways. A girl could be tempted with money, or good looks, or being told that she would become a 'princess'—although what the value of such a title would be to her is doubtful, especially if her prince's total wealth was counted in so many hundred head of sheep!

The simple Caucasian could see nothing wrong in following a lovely girl all day. He would sit himself down on the doorstep and wait for her until she went out again. He would follow her to friends, and dentists, to patisseries and gown-shops, with large, dark, and adoring eyes, and if he were bold enough he would try to talk to her or stroke her hand or attempt some other ridiculous attention. No harm was, of course, meant, and not all Caucasians had such bad manners. They were peculiar to the dandified mountaineer who had caught the evil city ways.

Well, the girls in our family always went escorted. If I was not present, then Shota, our servant would do the honours.

Shota was himself a Caucasian. He was a Georgian, and his *gwari*, or surname, was as beautiful as Shota's large grave eyes: Farnavazi. He belonged to a clan of princes, and in his youth he must have committed some indiscretion, about which he would never speak, for otherwise there would have been no reason for him to leave his family so abruptly and become a menial, or, as he called it, 'a slave'.

Shota was an elderly man, but young according to Cauca-

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sian standards. He must have been around sixty, but he had the agility and the health a man of forty might well envy. His hair was pure white, and he had a magnificent pair of whiskers, which he curled over a monstrously large finger, for Shota was a large man, and had a stomach that showed 'that God had been gracious to him'. But for all his fierce looks, Shota had a pair of deep, dark eyes, which were soft and dewy whenever he spoke of battles, and beautiful maidens, or the curious, sweet-smelling flowers that grew exclusively in his part of the mountains.

'I came to this city long ago,' he used to say, 'when you were very small, and I sold carpets like a Persian in the market-place here. It wasn't a business for a man, but the Persians are like women and they hate real work, preferring to sit on their haunches and dream carpet-patterns.'

I might explain that Shota was not a servant in the sense that he was a footman or a butler or a cook. He was a sort of bailiff or adviser and looked after the Baku house when we were away.

'My mother was a Mingrelian princess,' he told my father when he was engaged by him twenty years previously, 'but I shall serve you faithfully, unmindful of my great rank. I shall not steal unduly if you are just to me. I shall guard your wife and daughters from dishonour. This will I do.'

It was always Shota who made conditions, and we listened to him willingly, because he was a good man, over-fond perhaps of the Khitine wine, but honest and kindly. He had nursed us all in his arms when we were children, and when I and my two sisters grew up he broadened our education with Caucasian fairy tales, always seeking to astonish us, I think even at the risk of absolute veracity.

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'It may not be true,' he would say at the end of a particularly tall story, 'but it may come true. All sorts of things happen out there in the hills.'

One day my father, wishing to reward him for his long and faithful service, proposed that he should give him a large sum of money and send him for a holiday to 'the hills', but Shota refused. He was even a little angry.

'I shall not leave the plains', he said, 'until I am dead. Then they can cut me up into little pieces and put me in a bag of salt and carry me up into the hills.'

But Shota was for ever looking at the mountains. They were his brides, he said.

'Each peak is a beautiful woman, and Elbruz is the queen of them all. A man who is born among the mountains is free. Shall I tell you the story of the creation of those hills?'

We had heard the story often, but it improved at every telling and Shota got a pleasure in rolling out his magnificent sentences.

'I am Christian,' he would say with something like a sigh of regret, 'but that is my mother's fault. My father was a Moslem and he was able to kill men more easily than a Christian; it was he who told me the story of the Creation. I should believe what it says in our Christian Bible, but the Moslem story is more beautiful, so I'll tell you the Moslem one, but don't tell your father that I'm trying to convert you.'

'No, Shota, we promise we won't. Tell us the Moslem story,' we would say, and lying down on a carpet under some trees in the garden we would listen to Shota telling us the Moslem story of the creation of the Land of the Mountains—the Caucasus.



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‘When God, the Magnificent, the Mighty, the One, made the earth it was very flat. Like a piece of *tchurek* [hard pancake] and on this flat earth lived all sorts of creatures. The greatest of these creatures was Man, but there were beasts also, and Spirits and Troubles and Pestilences of all kinds. And when Allah—I mean, God—had made the earth, He was very pleased. It was green and good, and in the evening when the sun went down it was pleasant to walk about the earth, but it was too flat. It was as flat as the sea and if the sea grew a little playful it splashed over the earth and nearly drowned it. “Now this won’t do,” said the Lord. “And where are the little rivers.” But there were no rivers as there were no hills, so the Lord decided to give every land a sprinkling of mountains and hills. He put some mountains in a sack and went around the earth, seeking suitable places to put them on, but the Devil—may Allah, I mean God, bake him in red clay—he did not wish that God should make such fine gifts to men, so just as the Almighty One was winging his way between the Caspian and Black Seas, what do you think the Devil did?’

‘He slit the sack! He slit the sack and the mountains all fell out!’ we shouted, joyfully, knowing this to be the end of the story.

‘Ah, yes,’ Shota would say cunningly, ‘that’s right. He slit the sack and the hills all fell out, but you don’t know what the Lord said to the Devil, do you?’

We did not. Shota had suddenly decided to improve on his story.

‘He said, “Oh, you Hairy One, you Master of Troubles, are you trying to disturb what good I have done? I shall punish you, Never set foot on the mountains that you have spilt. Man and his animals can live on them, but you and all

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your nuisances, you shall never set foot on the hills. It will be hard enough to live on the hills without you!"'

We all nodded in approval of God's great wisdom and wondered why it was that 'Allah' always did such interesting things with devils, while our own God was quite content to make the world in seven days and nights.

'So you see,' Shota would say, realizing that an apt conclusion was necessary to his story, 'the great people stay up in the hills, the princes and the bandits, and the nobles. Men come down to the plains, where life is easy or when they are afraid.'

'Is that why you came down from the mountains?' I remember once asking him, but Shota did not reply. He fixed me with a dreadful stare of his coal-black eyes, and said, 'My son, in Paradise there are many birds that ask questions. Dost thou want to go to Paradise as a bird?'

I did not, so I forgot my curiosity. And that was many years ago, before the Revolution, the Azerbaijanis, and the abduction of my sister.

The Azerbaijanis had come in, riding on little ponies, with long kalpaks and lances. They sang as they entered Baku and proclaimed it as the capital of the new and free country of Azerbaijan, and people came out into the streets and danced, although few of them knew what it was to be free.

But the abduction of my sister was carried out in a curious way. 'It was definitely not Azerbaijan,' said Shota, who did not have much respect for them, treating them as half-plainmen, although your true Azerbaijan came from the mountains as well.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had been signed, and, as I said before, my parents were preparing to evacuate with my three

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sisters to Bulgaria, when the Azerbaijanians came into Baku. Except for sporadic shooting in the air, and the settlement of a few vendettas or 'blood-feuds', it was not exciting. But food became very expensive, epidemics broke out, and the new 'Government' did not seem capable of dealing with the situation. And to make matters worse, Shota came along and asked to be released from our service.

'Now that we Caucasians are becoming nations again', he said, 'I can go back to Georgia. They might need me. Give me enough for the journey and let me go. God's blessing be upon you all.'

And so Shota went and we were left alone to fend for ourselves in a city full of rather boisterous hillsmen. Heaven knows, they were nice jovial fellows, but the sight of European girls, who went unveiled, was too much for them, apparently. As good Moslems their women had walked around all their lives in thick yashmaks and heavy silken pantaloons. The European ladies went to their heads and they went around making offers of marriage or hinting darkly that they loved 'Madame So-and-So'. It was a good opportunity for widows and spinsters to get married to the native princes of Azerbaijan, handsome, tall, and rich in pasture and heads of sheep, and quite a number of them must have availed themselves of this chance. It happened that a very tall, suave Azerbaijan fell in love (so he declared) with my elder sister. Where he had met her or how, we did not know, but he visited my father and said that he desired an honourable marriage to my sister—how much?

My father was equally suave and polite and said that firstly his daughter was too young for marriage, and, secondly an honourable or even dishonourable marriage would be im-

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possible for her, as she was a Christian and her suitor was a Moslem.

‘But she can be converted? What does it matter? Has a woman a soul?’ asked the suitor. My father must have informed him that she had a soul. This grieved the suitor very much.

‘But have you ever seen my daughter?’ my father asked.

‘I have heard her speak,’ the man said. ‘I stood by your wall and heard her speak. She is very beautiful, I am sure. Marry me to her and I shall promise you she will not be barren, and children will one day gladden your eye.’

My father explained that he did not want his eye gladdened and that as far as he was concerned, no proposal of marriage would be entertained. As a last favour my father introduced the man to my sister Mhura, who behaved very correctly, and when the man had departed burst into laughter at the prospect of marriage. She admitted that he was handsome, however, and had good manners.

We forgot all about the incident and made preparations to go. As I was a midshipman at the time and was waiting for my recall to a boat, I thought it would be best if my family were out of the way before I went, so I did everything to hurry the departure. The authorities were only too anxious to have all the Russians out of Baku, so they did not hamper us in the least. They were expecting the Turks to attack the city at any time, and volunteered to have us escorted to the north; but who should appear as the head of our escort but our friend, the suitor for my elder sister’s hand?

On the night before we were ready to start off on our journey, my second sister went into Mhura’s room and found a note on the bed.

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'Do not grieve. I love her dearly.' It was signed with some princely title.

You can imagine what an uproar there was in the house. My father hurried to the 'Government' and demanded an explanation, and openly accused the man who had come to see him a few days previously, but the Government could do nothing. The man had disappeared, and they said, 'He loves her dearly. Why are you so worried? It's a custom. You can kill him if you like when you find him?'

'Find him?' said my father, desperately. 'Where shall I find him?'

The minister pointed to the mountains. 'Over there,' he said quite simply.

'But won't you send a search party?' my father demanded. 'I must have my child back. The girl is barely seventeen, besides it's preposterous. It's a joke.'

'It's a matter between your family and the abductor's. We can't force him to give her up. We don't know where he is. You find out. Kill the man if you like and then we will protect you and see that you get damages from his family.'

My father burst out into irritable laughter.

'Who do you think I am?' he yelled. 'I want my daughter back. Send an escort after him, or I'll complain to the Russian Government.'

The Minister was not to be bluffed.

'You haven't got a government. The Turks are marching into Batum to-day, and I'm busy, too busy to worry about a girl that runs away with one of our guards.'

My father and mother were beside themselves with grief. I did not know what to do. It would have been sheer madness for us to have gone into the hills. We knew nothing of the

## THE KIDNAPPING

ways or customs of the people. We did not know the geography. In fact we were at a complete loss and had not Shota turned up suddenly a week after his departure, I don't know what we should have done.

He listened gravely to the news and gave his opinion in the following manner.

'We shall find the man and kill him. Georgi and I will set out for the mountains to-morrow. We shall seek him high and low, and I shall ask my relatives and friends to be on the watch for him. When we have found the girl, we will bring her back.'

Of course, there was little consolation for my family in Shota's advice, but what else was there to do in the circumstances? So my father, mother, and the two other sisters set out for Bulgaria and I and Shota prepared ourselves for our man-hunting expedition.

The mountains seemed cold and uninviting when I looked at them that evening. They ceased to be panorama and became mysterious and frightening. Would I come out alive? I asked myself, and then I thought—why did Shota return?

## Chapter 2

# LAND OF MOUNTAINS

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'It is dawn,' said Shota, waking me up on the next day. My family had departed and the house was no longer full of the familiar sounds, the wakening of servants, the preparations for breakfast, and the cheerful good-mornings of the family as we filed into the dining-room. There was a strange, almost strangling silence about the house and Shota knew how I felt.

'It is sixty miles to Shamakha and if we get there, there will be good prospects of my meeting my relatives. They have come down from the hills to fight in the armies of Azerbaijan.'

'But I thought they were Georgians?' I said in surprise.

'So they are, but whenever there is a chance of a fight my uncle comes down to the plains. He's a Moslem and he has no love for the Christians. Ask me no more. I cannot often understand it myself. But he is important to us and will help us to find your sister.'

I did not argue after that, but waited for Shota to saddle the horses and prepare the packs we were going to take with us.

'But why so many clothes?' I asked him, as I watched him stripping my wardrobe almost clean and folding up the

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clothes into tight little bundles, which we fixed dexterously with hide-strings to the back of the saddle.

'It is important,' Shota said, rather impatient of my unconcealed curiosity. 'You see, in the hills you never know what you might be called upon to wear. In some valley it may be considered good taste to wear a black uniform and in another a white one. You do not wish to offend your hosts mortally by appearing incorrectly dressed, do you?'

I agreed that I did not, but I was amused that on a journey into what I considered almost 'savage' country such fine points of etiquette had to be observed. However, I refrained from any further questioning, waiting rather meekly for Shota to complete the packing.

'Shota,' I said, as I swung into the saddle, 'I put myself completely into your care. Whatever you tell me to do, I shall do it. I shall obey you like a son.'

Shota looked at me gravely with his large dark eyes and said, 'You will do well. The girl, your sister, will only be found if you make the people in the mountains your friends.'

After that Shota grew less serious, and began to explain to me the details of our journey. His knowledge was astonishing, considering that he had no map with which to guide him.

'We will go to Shamakha first. There we will meet my uncle and I will get him to declare you my adopted son.'

I started in astonishment. 'Your son, Shota?'

'Yes. That is the best way. Then your quarrel will become the quarrel of all my people. We are a large tribe, some five thousand strong, and five thousand can look out for the abductor better than we two. The vengeance they will wreak on him will be terrible. They will probably kill his kinsmen if they can't find him.'



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'But I have no quarrel with his kinsmen. I want my sister back. I'm not interested in stirring up strife.'

'That is the law of the mountains, Master Georgi. Your sister must be avenged, or paid for with a fair price. You may decide whichever you wish once we have found her. You can become a rich man.'

It was no use telling Shota that I had no desire to part with my sister for any amount of vengeance or money. I merely nodded my head to indicate agreement, and let him lead our two horses out of the courtyard.

'We shall not ride until we have left the city,' Shota informed me, 'for we might be stopped and our horses taken away from us. Let us pretend that we are merchants, carrying cloth and saffron and madder for the carpet-makers of Daghestan.'

So we walked the whole length of Baku, keeping as far as we could to the sea-coast, and then turning sharply to the left, as Shota indicated that there was a short cut through the oil-wells.

At this time the wells were closed; although a few of the richer borings were still being worked—the British and French organizers could not find enough workmen, and so things were in abeyance. No longer was it possible to hear the full gush of the oil as it spurted into the large pipes, and the once persistent drilling and hammering was only sporadic as we rode through the length of the huge pitted plain.

'Look,' said Shota, pointing his finger to the right, 'there are great fires.'

I looked and saw three or four large tongues of fire waving on the horizon like great tea-roses and knew that those were our wells. It was bound to happen once it was known that my

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family had left. It was a vengeance, perhaps, for the low wages that were paid and the dreadful conditions under which the oil workers of Baku lived. But at that time my social conscience had hardly stirred.

‘Such waste!’ I said, but Shota laughed.

‘Waste? Master Georgi, shall I tell you what they called this very land on which we are now riding? Persian princes used to come here and watch the spectacle the burning oil made, and they called it “*ader-badagan*”—the garden of fires. When the sun caught the oil alight they watched the fire-blossoms.’

I was pleased with Shota’s description and told him so. ‘You have the soul of a poet, Shota. Tell me more of this garden of fire.’

‘I know little, but in my young days I was a scholar. Do not laugh. You see Shota as a faithful servant, but he was a scholar in his young days, well renowned for his learning, speaking not only his native Georgian, but Persian, Arabic, and Armenian. I read many books of the West, old books translated into Arabic, and I taught many a nobleman to read and write.’

‘I didn’t know that, Shota,’ I confessed, ‘then why . . .?’

‘Then why did I take the task of a menial?’ he inquired, raising his eyebrows a little as he smiled. ‘I cannot tell you that. It is a secret. On it my life depends, but I will tell you,’ his voice suddenly lightened and I knew that he was going to change the subject, ‘that one Barbaro, a traveller from Italy—who came after the man they called Marco Polo——’

‘So you know of Marco Polo?’ I exclaimed in astonishment, still unable to believe what Shota said about his scholarship.

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'I know of many things, young master, of which you shall hear me tell. But let me tell you what this Barbaro said.' And Shota proceeded to tell me. Careful to preserve the ancient expressions, he spoke to my astonishment the old Slavonic, which is rarely used in Russia except in church services.

I have since checked up on Shota's rendering and find it to be:

'Upon this side of the sea there is another citie called Bachu, whereof the sea of Bachu taketh name, neere unto which citie there is a mountaigne that casteth foo' the blacke oyle stynkeng horryble, which they nevertheless use for furnissheng of their lightes, and for the anyonteng of their camells, twies a yere. For if they were not anyoynted they wolde become skabbie.'

I must say that I laughed heartily at Shota's translation of this description of Baku, and he was very pleased.

'So you see what the learned Barbaro thought of your native city?' he said, jokingly. 'But he ought to see it now!'

Baku was not an unbeautiful city. Standing by the blue Caspian Sea as it did, it had long promenades and fine buildings, and even Barbaro would have admired its handsome 'prospects', the boulevards that stretched from one end to the other, making the city symmetrical and attractive. It had its 'native' quarter, full mostly of Persians selling carpets and strange produce, but the European part of the city was dazzlingly white, for all the heavy pall of smoke that hung like Doom's cloud far out on the outskirts.

Although I myself had been born in Baku, I did not know it very well. Travelling with my family from place to place and then later going to the Naval Academy at Kronstadt, I had little time to make any intimate inspection.

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'You know,' said Shota, 'in the days before Baku was so named, the city was called Pakavan. It was then that its history was most interesting. For the meaning of Pakavan is "the city of idols", for in the "garden of fire" they set up many images. The first god of the Georgians, Armazi—better known as Ormuzd—came from Pakavan, brought there by the fire-worshippers of Persia. As we journey through the mountains so I shall show you the old shrines of this great god, who was before the God of Moses and the God of the Christians. The gods are very old in the mountains.'

I was tempted there and then to ask Shota about the old gods, but he had put the horses into a canter and I had little wind left in me for questions when at the end of a five-hour journey we alighted in order to take some refreshment.

'We have very little water,' said Shota, tapping the small, barrel-like casket he had slung over his saddle, 'and we shall need it. Let us take water-melons from the field and some tchurek and cheese. It will be enough until we reach a posting-house.'

So Shota and I crept into a melon field and hacked off two large melons for ourselves. I might mention that the melon field seemed to stretch interminably and no-one in this part of the world would grudge a traveller a few water-melons. Our creeping was therefore not strictly necessary, but it prevented us from being seen and perhaps attacked and robbed, for in this period of disintegration bands of mountaineers had come down for the express purpose of robbing the stupid people they encountered in the valleys. Although Shota was a mountaineer himself and undoubtedly knew how to defend himself with sword and pistol, his family was far away, and should he have been killed there would have been no-one to

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avenge him. The law of the mountains was stronger in Shota's veins than any scholarship.

When we arrived at the posting-house we were both dead tired, for we had done half the journey to Shamakha in record time. Neither the cackling of the chickens that roosted in our dormitory nor the screeching of the cocks about to be slaughtered for our supper could keep us awake. We put down our bundles of clothes on the floor and fell on them—into a headlong sleep. The keepers of the 'guest-house' said afterwards that they made every effort to wake us up, but we simply refused to unglue our eyes. Indeed, it was not surprising, for we slept like bears in winter, and when we woke up we found that dawn had come and it was necessary for us to be on our way again. We ate the chicken, which had been boiled and thrust into rice, hurriedly, and after paying a few pence for the accommodation and our food, we mounted again, promising to be in Shamakha before nightfall.

The journey to Shamakha was uneventful. I remember noticing the great activity that went on in picking nuts of all sorts, barks, and leaves of plants and I asked Shota what the people were doing.

'They are gathering dyes. You see, gall-nuts, acorns, mulberry and vine leaves, besides hundreds of other leaves and berries, produce the most exquisite colours. You know the colour called "kirmiz"? Well, they obtain a small insect from the bark of the oak tree—the cochineal insect. And then of course, there is madder—which is essential for the dyeing of rugs and carpets. It is a subtle art—the mixing of colours. Take the colour red for instance. Do you know how they made that colour?"

I said I did not. Living in Baku, amid the most famous

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carpet industry in the world, I was profoundly ignorant of carpets. I had often wondered at the miracles that were produced, but I had never questioned anyone about them.

'Well, the red is made by mixing alum-water, grape-juice, and madder, and if you want to make brown, you apply madder over indigo, and the rich Iranian blue comes by reversing the processes. Dilute with milk, water, and sour grape-juice and you get violet. Take saffron—you know the colour? And you can get many variations of yellow and orange that when mixed with proportions of indigo give fine shades of green. El Irdissi says that "in all the country of Ran, that is from Bab-el-Abwab as far as Tiflis, madder grows on the ground, and they collect great quantities of it. The substance is transported by way of the Caspian Sea to Jorjan, and from there on the back of beasts into India. It is superior in quality to all other kinds of madder." '

'So this is the place where the dyes come from,' I said. 'I had peculiar and quite different visions. I thought most dyes were mineral.'

'Not at all. The best dyes are vegetable. Josaphat Barbaro, the man who spoke so unkindly of Baku—was more generous to the "fustians, linnen, cloths, fryses, many rugges and a lytel sylke" we make here.'

'Why do you say "we", Shota? You're a Georgian. This is the province of Shrivani.'

'Because, once upon a time, we Georgians ruled nearly all over the Caucasus. That was a long time ago. And besides, we Caucasians are united by our needs, our geography, so why shouldn't I say "we"?''

'You're a very wise man, Shota,' I said, 'to say these things.'

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I hear that there are men who want to set up little kingdoms all over the Caucasus again.'

'That would mean war and jealousy. What we need is friendship. We must work together, free to speak our language and obey our customs, but in a common bond with all the nations around us.'

'You speak like a Bolshevik, Shota,' I said, laughingly.

'I speak like a man who has seen many wars in the hills and who has seen much suffering. No man is better than another, and there are customs in the hills that must change. There are men who must be sent away, for they will always disturb our peace and bring war upon us.'

'But you just said that you must obey your own customs?' I said, more out of argumentativeness than anything else.

'I should have said—good customs. There are many that are bad.'

I was silent for a moment, and when Shota saw me reflecting he said, 'You do not have to wonder. I was a scholar, Master Georgi, in the old days. I read the Koran and the Bible and I knew the sciences of the Arabians. I was a good chemist, too—a Master of Perfumes, and a much revered man, and I became such a wise man that I tried to persuade my kinsmen and the people in the mountains to give up the blood-feud.'

I was more and more astonished.

'But you yourself said that your kinsmen would kill the man who stole my sister. You yourself spoke of the blood-feud as if it were a natural thing.'

Shota looked at me gently, and then placing his hand on mine he said, 'My son, the customs in the mountains are very old. You cannot change the people until you change their

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lives. That is the mistake I made. I thought reason and argument could do that, but I was wrong. Once you give men new occupations, give them easier lives, and show them other parts of the world, then they will be more willing to change their customs. But in my day these things were impossible.'

'Did you ever read Tolstoi, Shota?'

'Yes, I read him,' said Shota, 'and although I agreed much with what he said, I knew that his way was not the right way either.'

'But do you know the right way?'

'How should I? That is why I have gone back to the customs. I have not seen my family for over twenty years. I have a wife and children and cousins and an old grand-uncle who is nearly a hundred. I left them all twenty years ago. I thought the world would change and men would become better and kinder—but it hasn't. I'm an old man now, and I want to go back to my people. So why should I care to reform the customs? They were there before me and they will probably be there when I die and after me.'

'Was that why you went away?'

'Yes. I went to Shamakha, where my grand-uncle lives, and begged his forgiveness. He told me not to return to my country until I had sent word that I had repented. That is why I returned; I knew it would be many days before my kinsmen would sheath their knives. Now, I and you can go into the mountains. We shall be safe. Our kinsmen will protect us.'

'Then the customs aren't so bad,' I said. 'After all, they grew up because they were necessary.'

'Yes,' said Shota, sadly, 'I know that. That was the problem—how to make them unnecessary?'

'Did you think you had the solution?'



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'Why should all things in life necessarily have a solution? No. I had no solution. I wanted to change men by knowledge and by showing them that they had all common interests, That failed. Speak no more of it. I am an old man, now, and I shall obey the customs of my people. I cannot make all the fools wise.'

I decided to drop the subject, but I was deeply sorry for Shota. Surprised and sorry. Moreover, I felt rather guilty for the condescension with which we had treated him at home. How were we to know that our Georgian bailiff was a man of considerable learning and a reformer? His appearance, his curious stories, all showed his origin, and we were never one moment in doubt but that he was some shepherd in his youth, who turned to soldiering and then later came to Baku to settle down. How wrong we were!

From that moment on I began to have a far greater respect for Shota, knowing that the anecdotes and tales he told me in my childhood were but a small part of his rich funds of Caucasian lore. He was even an etymologist of sorts! But what was most astonishing about him was his great reading of the historians of centuries ago.

We were just outside Shamakha when we saw some white falcons and Shota was not at a loss for an explanation.

'They do not belong to this region, but come from Derbend --Bab-al-Abwab is its Persian name--although white falcons are also known in Armenia. El-Masudi, who had travelled far in these regions and whose observations on natural life are as interesting as those of Pliny, says that these falcons are soon made tame; and one has little fear that they will associate with other wild birds; but they are rather weak --because the sportsmen who catch them round the island near Derbend

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feed them on fish ; and if any other food is given to them they become reduced in strength. Men who distinguish themselves by their knowledge of falconry, and of the different sorts of rapacious birds that have been employed for the same purpose among the Persians, Turks, Byzantines, Hindus, and Arabs, say that falcons of the white colour are quickest and handsomest ; that they have the best shape and chest ; and that they are soonest tamed, and the strongest of all falcons to rise in the air ; that they have the longest breath, and fly farthest, for they are very light and spirited, and they have a hotter temper than any other species of falcons. The difference in colour depends on the difference in climate. Hence they are of pure white in Armenia, in the country of the Khazarms in Jorjan, and the neighbouring countries of the Turks, on account of the great fall of snow in those climates.'

I listened enchanted to Shota's description.

'That's why I say white falcons are rare here. They like the mountains, and we have many miles to go yet before we reach them. Here very little snow falls. But enough of falcons. Now you are going to meet my grand-uncle, and I had better tell you a few things about him, so that you will not appear ignorant of his prowess when you see him.'

The information Shota imparted to me proved very useful when I met his uncle. His name, I learnt, was Farsman in Georgian, but as he had lived in Shamakha, he preferred to use a more Persianized name and he called himself Khan Jahan ; but when asked about his *gwari* (his surname) he proudly said he was a Farnavazi, descendant of kings. Moreover, this old gentleman had at an early age left Georgia and in the transition had embraced Islam.

'It is understandable', said Shota, 'for a man like my

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grand-uncle. As a Christian he could only have had one wife. He has ten. He is very rich and very proud, and you must remember he was a great soldier in his day. If you remind him of this frequently he will send word to his friends in Daghestan and they will look for your sister and her abductor.'

So my meeting of Khan Jahan was the politest, the most courteous and flattering that old man had probably ever witnessed. I am afraid he smiled a little at my attempts to please him, but he was pleased all the same.

'I have seen many battles, my son,' he said to me, after he had blessed me with his saffron-coloured palms, and had bidden me to sit in cross-leg fashion as the Persians do, 'but when the Tsar came to the Caucasus, things changed. They tried to make me learn the alphabet and sign my name! As if it made a man braver or stronger because he understood how to make a spider's scrawl on paper.'

'As if!' I echoed politely, while Shota sat by my side, ready to make a correction, no doubt, whenever I made a mistake.

'What are we coming to when soldiers have to become scribblers. They no longer attack villages and carry off the beautiful girls, or take the fattest sheep from their enemies' pens. Instead they sit and gaze on big parchments, while their swords grow rusty and old. What business has a knight to look at books, I'd like to know?'

'No reason, Khan Jahan, O illustrious one,' I said, feeling very much like the cobbler before Haroun-el-Raschid.

'Men no longer sleep with their daggers in their hands. They shave off their whiskers.' At the mention of whiskers the venerable old man stroked his from tip to tip—pulling them out as if to show me what a gorgeous pair he had

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managed to grow. 'In the old days our fathers conquered the world, and now what do we do?'

'They speak highly of you in the villages of Daghestan and in the city of Baku,' I lied. 'They tell of your great strength and kindness and that you live according to the Holy Book.'

'For one so young,' said Khan Jahan, 'you speak very wisely.'

I looked at Shota to see whether he was satisfied with the impression I was making, but he gave me no encouragement; but when he saw that the source of my inspiration had dried up, he said, 'Ask my uncle how many men he has killed and how many maidens he has seduced.'

I did what I was told, although I felt that such personal matters could not be discussed in public. Khan Jahan, however, was on a favourite topic and Shota knew how to humour him.

'Very many,' he answered my question. He indicated by his 'very many' that the number of men he had killed and the number of maidens he had seduced was beyond mere computation. Looking at his fierce moustache and the huge mountain of a man that he was, I was ready to believe almost anything he was prepared to confess. But Khan Jahan was soon tired of my inexperienced flatteries and he asked me pointedly what I was doing in Shamakha.

'Here the winds blow uneasily. We have malaria at this time of the year. Why have you left the village of Baku?'

The village of Baku! His pride forbade him to speak of it as a city. Only Shamakha was a city. Moscow itself would only be a village to him!

It was then that Shota spoke up for me.

'Most esteemed and old uncle. This youth is my adopted son and he has lost his sister, a girl of rare beauty.'

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'Ah,' said the old man.

'She is as wise as she is good; a jewel among women, and much beloved by her bereaved brother.'

'Is the abductor known to you? Is he a man of good station? Has he many kinsmen?'

'He is an Azerbaijan or a Daghestan. We do not know. He was the captain of a troop of horsemen and he pressed his suit on the beautiful sister of my adopted son. She and her father refused him, so he came by night and stole her.'

'A gallant thief!' the old man exclaimed to my chagrin. You never knew where you were with these customs. 'But of course, if we find him, we shall kill him.' This cheered me up, although I did not particularly wish for the death of the 'gallant thief'—wanting only the return of my sister.

Shota spoke again.

'My uncle will call the family together and we shall hunt the man. You and I will go into the mountains of Daghestan and they will look for him in Chechen, Karbardia, and Georgia. I do not think he could have gone farther.'

'The man is brave, but he must die if we find him with the maiden,' said Khan Jahan. 'We shall have the whole *gwari* looking for him and her. Describe her to me and not in too great detail.'

So Shota described my sister to the khan, with a great profusion of flatteries, comparing her to a milk-white dove, to a gazelle, and her skin to the skin of peaches (a compliment not only common to the west!) and finally wound up by giving the khan a portrait of her.

'She goes unveiled?' the Khan Jahan asked.

'She is a Christian,' said Shota.

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‘No matter,’ said the khan, ‘she is your adopted son’s sister and she shall be found.’

I must say that I found the old man’s tone of authority very reassuring and when he gave me his parting advice this is what he said.

‘There are wild men in Daghestan, such as you will not find in any other part of the world. You will find it difficult to journey through the land without making any mistakes, but above all you must respect old people, submit yourself to the customs of the district, and remember that money has no power in the hills. And should you have any doubt—look at Shota, and do as he does. And Allah be with you.’

## Chapter 3

# THE VALLEY OF LAUGHTER



‘And at daybreak they looked eastward, and midway between the sea and the sky they saw white snow-peaks hanging, glittering sharp and bright above the clouds. And they knew they were come to Caucasus, at the end of the earth; Caucasus the highest of all mountains, the father of the rivers of the east. On his peak is chained the Titan, while a vulture tears his heart, and at his feet are piled dark forests round the magic Colchian land.’

KINGSLEY’s *Heroes*, ‘The Argonauts’

We followed the old nomad routes to Derbend, a track trod by caravanserais for many centuries. Conquerors had stamped through the plains, Mongols, Turks, Bulgars, and Russians, but the land still remained the same, rich, fantastically fertile. Plums the size of apples, apples the size of small pumpkins, grapes as large as a sheep’s eye, all these wonders may be seen here, but Shota and I rode quickly. We were heading for the mountains, where the relatives of Khan Jahan had their aul—their village. Here we should be received and refreshed and aided in our search.

Derbend is old. They called it the Gate of Gates, Bab-al

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Abwab, and the commerce of all the Caspian passed through it; now it has sunk into unimportance; but in the days when the Khazars from Astrakhan traded and raided the city it was the pearl of the Caucasus. From here the ships came from the Khazars, bringing famous furs, which were taken over to the Black Sea, and trade with the Bulgarians and other Turki tribes. El Masudi, whom we shall have occasion to quote again and again, said, 'From this country come the furs of black and red foxes that are called the Bortasian furs. A black fur of this kind costs one hundred dinars and more, but the red are cheaper. Dresses of these furs are worn by the kings of the Arabs and the Barbarians; and they form part of their vanity, for they are considered more valuable than the furs of sable, hermiline, and the like. The kings wear tiaras, kaftans, and robes of these furs. If kings have their kaftans and robes lined with black Bortasian fox furs it is excusable (although it is against the divine laws).'

After Derbend, where we stayed for a night, we pushed on to Utemish, a small village that had seen Peter the Great defeat a native army of Lesghians, a people we were to come across frequently as we reached the slopes of Daghestan. But most interesting of all was the ruined town of Temir-Khan-Shura, a city built by Tamerlaine and destroyed by the Russians. A few people still lived in the ruins, and they would come out and offer fruit and refreshment to the traveller. Here Azerbaijan ended. We saw the great iron wall built by some chieftain in days gone by—a vast structure of crude iron, stretching between the mountain ridge and the sea; upon it was engraved: 'Here begins Azerbaijan'.

'A clever trick,' remarked Shota, 'he diverted the road to road to the plain, while he and his tribesmen lived in the



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higher reaches. A very wise ruler. His name was Irakli—Hercules. He was a capable and brave man, and as we pass into the mountains you will see the blockhouses he established against the wild Lesghians. He restored the ancient universities of Tiflis and Telavi, with the help of the Cathilicos Antoni, who wasn't very popular in Russia just then. He surrounded himself with many brilliant personages like Joseph Emin and the philosopher Ter Philippe Quaitmazian, and it might astonish you to know that his deeds were well known not only in Persia and Turkey, but farther west in Europe. Frederick the Great once said, "*Moi en l'Europe, et en l'Aise l'invincible Hercule.*"

My admiration for Shota's knowledge knew no bounds, but when I heard him speaking in French I was more than astonished, I gaped.

'Ah, that's an old trick,' said Shota, 'and you mustn't mind it. I've remembered the sentence in sounds. I don't know any more French than that; had I travelled after my course in Tiflis—in the university Irakli built—I could tell you many more interesting stories. But come, here is Daghestan.

And there beyond Temir-Khan-Shura were the dark slate-grey mountains of Daghestan. Magnificent. Aloof. The plain had finished. The bright green of the forests was over. We looked on the dark green pines and knew that soon we would be in the aul of Khan Jahan's relatives.

'You are coming into a strange land,' Shota said. 'Remember my uncle's warning. You will find the common people pleasant enough, but some of the nobles are overweening and stupid. I remember an interesting passage from Joseph Emin when he was recounting the difficulties the king Irakli had with his nobles. "With all my care and pains, I cannot

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make anything of them, nor find a single soul who has sense enough to incline his mind or bend his thoughts towards meaning well; they are wicked to the soul, false to the very bone; in a word, they were born twenty-four hours before the devil. As for fighting, they do not want courage; but what of that? The wild beasts of the field have as much. . . . But what shall we do," Irakli asked Emin, "to make men of them?" Emin said, "Break them into small pieces like glass, to be cast afresh."

Barely had Shota given me King Irakli's opinion of his noble subjects when we heard shooting. It seemed that a thousand rifles were going off in the air at the same time.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," said Shota without perturbation. "They've seen us going into the valley, that's all. It's their welcome. They are a wild lot. But I don't think they have any objection to us—otherwise we should have had some bullets in us by now."

"What? Do you mean you came into this valley knowing that we might get shot?"

"Why, of course. That's the only way with the Lesghians. They pride themselves on their bravery, and you have to prove you're more brave, that's all. I would have told you, but I wasn't sure about your nerves."

I laughed rather bitterly, but I realized that Shota knew the queer customs of this unholy, grey little valley where the Lesghians lived.

We managed to get our horses up on to a fairly high ridge (it was apparently the only pass) when we heard laughter, and looking up at the huts where some of the men sat we saw that they were rocking with mirth, barely able to sit up in the perches they called home.

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'What are they laughing at?' I asked, a little afraid, I must confess, that they would let their rifles off again.

'Oh, they are laughing at us,' said Shota, 'but it's better that way. You laugh too. We'll soon leave them behind, and then we can change our clothes.'

'What do you mean—change our clothes? Why should we?'

Shota explained patiently to me.

'You see,' he said, 'these clothes we are wearing are of light material and we've got gold daggers in our belts.'

'Well, what about it?'

'These people are very particular. I mean, you'd look funny in those clothes in Baku or in Moscow or Paris, wouldn't you? Well, in every valley there are different people with different habits and different fashions. In this valley, it isn't considered good taste to wear a gold dagger with light clothes. You've got to put on a black dress. You've got one. So hop off the horse and change.'

'Very strange,' I said.

'But quite right if you think of it. Gold and white don't go together as well as gold and black, do they? I once saw a man riding with all his medals on his white uniform, and they simply followed him from village to village, almost begging him not to have such vile taste and either to take off his medals or put on a black dress. It didn't matter to them that the decorations had been given to him by the Shah of Persia himself.'

So I stopped arguing and did what I was told. Aesthetic people, these Lesghians, I thought.

'You see, the whole of this particular tribe consider themselves noblemen,' said Shota, 'and although they don't know

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what King Irakli thought of them, they keep up their noble habits even though their lives are very poor and miserable.' Then Shota added, 'Khan Jahan's aul is in the next valley, but as the descent is very steep, we had better lead our horses, and don't be surprised at anything that happens.'

Here we negotiated a stream, or crossed over a fissure by means of a very rough dilapidated bridge made of trees strung together with tough hides and thrown across the gorge. Shota would crawl out to try them, for safety's sake, although every time he did so my heart nearly stopped beating. It was not only for Shota's safety that I was worried. What would I do if he suddenly disappeared down a ravine? I might not know what clothes to put on in what valley, and get manhandled or laughed at or even refused food because of my bad sartorial taste!

But nothing like that happened. We had barely reached the ledge on the other side of the mountain we had skirted when we saw the small compact aul belonging to Khan Jahan's relatives.

'These people are real Lesghians and you will like them. They are wise and read the Koran, as you shall see for yourself. My uncle was married to one of them, hence they are my relatives too and will comfort and greet us kindly. Be not surprised at anything you see. Their customs will seem strange to a city-dweller, but they are hallowed from time immemorial.'

I straightened out my black dress, adjusted my dagger, and following Shota's advice I prepared myself for the worst.

It did not take us long to reach the small *sakyla*—the house with a flat roof and large verandas—that belonged to the particular family. It was prayer-time and the inhabitants of the *sakyla* had taken out their prayer-mats and were kneeling

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with their faces towards Mecca, while from the grey stone minaret, set a little apart from the aul, I heard the nasal intonation of 'Allahu Akbar'—'Allah is great'—and slid off my horse and sank on my knees careful to follow Shota in everything prescribed in the ritual, and bending my head to the ground as he did.

Our hosts were apparently ardent followers of the Prophet, for they wore the small green turbans of teachers of the law, and when we entered the house we saw three or four of the men bent over the flowing, graceful Arabic script.

'These are pious men,' said Shota to me sufficiently loudly for the elders to hear, 'and they have been studying the wisdom of the Koran for many years. They have all been to Mecca and they deserve special reverence for that. We shall not disturb them, but go to the head of the family.'

We passed through the ranks of the learned men with bent heads, but they did not so much as glance up at us. They looked worn and emaciated from their long labours over the Koran, but they were honoured men and as such had no need to look at casual strangers with whom they had no business.

We had barely passed out of that room when we heard someone calling to us. It was a female voice, very old and thin.

'Dushka Jan! Dushka Jan!'

Shota and I turned round and we saw a very wizened old lady, flapping her arms like wings and approaching us, muttering, 'Dushka Jan! Dushka Jan!'

She approached quite near before Shota recognized her, and then his eyes suffused with tears. He went down on his knees before the old lady.

'Aya! Aya!' he said tenderly as the lady put her hands on

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his head and uttered a blessing strange in a Mohammedan community.

'The Virgin and all the saints protect you,' she said. Then Shota stood up and the old lady without so much as a warning began sniffing him.

'A fine smell,' she said. 'Thou art old, Shota Jan, but strong. Give me thy arms.' And Shota gave the lady his arms, which she sniffed again. 'My own, my own. Rememberest thou when I did wash thee, and tend thee and give thee suck?'

Shota remembered all these things, and his frame shook with sobs.

'My nurse,' he mumbled, 'my nurse. She is very old, otherwise the custom of the mountains decrees that she should now give me suck.'

I am afraid that I should have found it a little ludicrous to see a full-grown man of sixty being given pap by a nurse who was certainly well over eighty, but prepared for surprises as I was I did not bat a lid when he rather symbolically kissed her on the breast.

It was only then that he introduced me to her as his adopted son. I wondered whether I should have to go through the same ritual, but she was a perceptive old lady, and seeing my discomfiture she said in very good Russian, 'God be with you, my son's son. You must be hungry and tired after your long journey. Come, I will show you to your quarters.'

Shota and I followed her into a large room, a sort of guest-room, I should imagine, from its size and the many beds in it.

'You will rest here until sunset, and then eat with the family,' she commanded. I was amused to see the big Shota taking his orders from the ancient old lady as if he was still a child.

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'She is a wonderful old lady,' he said, as we lay down on the sheepskins on the floor, 'and much respected. My mother died when I was a small child and she fed me and my brothers and her own children from her breast. And that makes her a blood relative of ours. Actually she is from Khevsur and that is many valleys away, nearer my own Georgia. She was stolen from that valley and brought here and has long forgotten her own people, although she still uses the Khevsure greeting. They are Christians, you see, although they do not know our Lord Jesus Christ.'

'How's that?' I said. 'Christians, but don't know the founder of Christianity?'

'I will tell. But not now. We will travel to that valley on our way to Georgia, so be patient. Take rest, for we have many more miles to go in pursuit of your sister's abductor.'

So I did not question Shota further on the Khevsurs, but prepared myself for sleep. My mind, however, was too occupied with thoughts and I was too excited by first experiences in Daghestan. I listened to Shota's breathing and remembered ruefully his tale that if a man drinks woman's milk when he is a baby, and then drinks horse's milk when he is a grown-up man, his sleep will be like that of the angels. I had done neither, but the neighing of horses outside the room promised that there would be large draughts of the sweet-sour milk of the mountain mares, the milk of longevity, that made men sleep like angels. How fortunate it was, I said to myself, that Shota had always spoken the dialect of the mountains with us. I was able to follow the words of a song from an adjoining room:

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*'Each heartbeat powdered you into forgetfulness,  
Beneath a snow of dreams you melted O so rapidly,  
And I went lost in grievance, having sold you out for moans.'*

The singer was surely a Georgian! Shota stirred and I saw him open his eyes wide as the singer continued his song.

*'The moon lay drowned among the mountain-tops  
And in the gorges a blue mist had threaded every rock  
A thousand nightingales had died, you said, among the apricots. . . .'*

'Sumi, the lawyer!' Shota exclaimed.

'Who's that?' I asked timidly, curious of the pleasant penetrating voice.

'He is a very wise man and a fine singer. He is a lawyer. He knows the custom of mountains better than any other man. We shall ask him the "blood-price" for your sister and he shall tell us. But wait he sings again. . . .

*'And yet there were shadows in the pines,—a woman stooping  
to a well  
Her breasts lay like cold frosted fruits in her black vest  
And I believe she had a name something like Tamara. . . .'*

'Yes, that is Sumi. Good fortune attends those who meet Sumi. We shall see him at dinner-time and will speak to him fully and he will aid us.'

Who Sumi was, how wise, and how helpful, I did not realize until we were summoned to the 'table'—or rather to the cushions. By that I mean that we entered a room that was exclusively furnished with large soft carpets, on which bright silken cushions had been spread. This was the only furniture



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in the room. Guests sat, slept, reclined, and ate on these cushions.

Sumi was given a place of honour beside the relative of Khan Jahan, a small white-bearded man who greeted us in the khan's name somewhat abruptly, but who on learning our business was more friendly.

'A woman has been stolen?' he asked in an outraged whisper, as if really enjoying the opportunity of saying such a deliciously outrageous thing. 'The sister of your adopted son?'

At these words I noticed that the other guests, relatives, no doubt, or elders of the aul, fingered their long daggers.

'By whom?' asked our host, whose name, I think, was Ali-Mirza. 'Is he a man of our aul or some near-by aul?'

'We do not know the man's name,' said Shota, 'but we well remember his appearance. He is tall and elegant and has bright eyes, and is a great seducer, by the look of him. They say he is an Azerbaijan, but looking at his dagger, as I did when he left it in the house of my friend and adopted son, Georgi, I should say he was a Daghestan. One of your own men, but of a different tribe. The last we heard of him he was fleeing for the mountains. Have you seen him or the girl?'

Silence fell on the assembly of dining notables, but their fingers itched on their daggers still. Everyone looked at everyone else, but made no reply to Shota's question.

'The habit of stealing a woman for wife has died down among us,' said Ali-Mirza, with a cunning lick of his lips, 'or at least it is regulated carefully and used only for ceremonial purposes. Do not think, cousin, that it is a man from our valley or from the tribe, which is rich and prolific in women and needs no others, for every valley around us is full of this "mega"....'

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The other guests laughed at this sally, except Sumi, the lawyer. He listened gravely, and now and again cut himself a piece of cold mutton with his dagger. He had the quiet assurance of a man who knows that he will be consulted at any moment, as soon, that is, as the company had lost its taste for coarse wit.

I observed Sumi carefully, and I liked his manners. He had rather a pinched face, thin, with handsome eyes, and a fine aquiline nose. He looked more like a Persian than a Georgian, and his graces at table were slightly effeminate. But in the Caucasus, where the races are so mixed, it is difficult to ascribe a man to any particular tribe or nationality.

'And you,' said Shota, when the conversation had died down and the expressions of indignation had been expressed, 'do you know, learned master of the law, where such a man may be apprehended?'

Sumi did not answer immediately. He sucked his teeth for a moment and said slowly in a sing-song voice, 'The mountains are large.' He again sucked at his teeth. 'None of us here are eagles.' Suck. 'Who can tell?' Suck. 'You say he is from Daghestan?' Suck. 'You saw his dagger?' Suck. 'But from your description I would say he was a Lamroi.'

'Allah!' exclaimed the guests. 'A Lamroi! a robber prince?'

'What makes the wise Sumi say that?' Shota inquired.

'Because I saw such a man and such a maiden as you have described making for the mountains in Chechenia. He is a Circassian, strong and beautiful of limb, and she is like a wild pear-blossom. Am I right?'

Shota conceded the fact to the lawyer, who resumed.

'It was some two weeks ago I saw them, in a village. He is very bold, and seeing that men were asking me the price of blood and I was telling them the law, he rode up to me, with

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the maiden clenched in his arms like a struggling ewe, and said, "Here behold, O lawyer, what prize I have from the sparrow-headed plainsmen. I stole her. I a Lamroi! And I shall wed her and raise me up a brood of Lamrois and we shall harry your villages and steal your sheep!" The villagers were angry at his boasting, but, as everyone knows, the Lamroi are great boasters. They are clever, too, and you know what a reputation these men have, how skilled they are in ways of killing. He talked and talked about his prowess and said that the girl was a Russian princess, and indeed the girl spoke Russian and begged me to release her, but what could I do? I said, "Your kinsmen will kill your abductor, or he will pay a large blood-price."

How impatiently and with what joy I heard this news! At least now I knew that my sister was alive.

'Tell me more,' I begged him, out of my turn, for one of the elders was about to speak. Shota tugged me by the arm and I subsided into silence.

'We have had many rulers in the Caucasus,' said the elder, who I suspect was regarded as a bore by his confrères. He was a toothless old man, and his nose ran rather indecorously all the time. 'Roman and Greek, they say, visited us. Arabs, Persians, and Turks—and now the Russians, and they have all brought their laws, and imposed their taxes. But have one of them ever dared to abolish our blood-feud? Could they? I hear the new Government in Russia is going to come to us and make us abolish our custom. What the Persians, the Greeks, and the Tartars could not do, will these new Russians be able to?'

The others shook their heads and went on eating. They must have heard this story so often.

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'It is a sacred obligation. We will give up many things, but not revenge. The mountains that bred us command revenge. Why, my own father was sent to Siberia by some Russian Tsar because he slew the slayer of his brother-in-law's cousin.'

Murmurs of approval greeted this announcement and someone else picked up the hoary tale.

'Nearly the whole of my village moved to Turkey and Syria, where they let us practise our customs. They say two million men, women, and children left their beloved hills for Turkey rather than submit to such a violation of their laws.'

'And what', said Sumi, 'is this blood-feud, this law that is mightier than all the laws of sultan, shah, and tsar?'

People pricked up their ears whenever Sumi spoke. He would always give some correct interpretation that he had written down in his large parchment books. He produced one of these and read out his composition. He looked pointedly at me and said, 'The plainsmen, the non-Caucasians, think that the blood-feud is the product of a barbarian mind, savage, untutored. They know nothing of its complications, its code, its exacting discipline. There is nothing primitive about it.'

I nodded my head to show that I appreciated all that he said, and I could see that he was pleased at my astuteness.

'In what other jurisprudence is there such a complicated law as our law of kanly—the avenger's law?'

Sumi, lawyer, was the same as hundreds of thousands of other lawyers in the world. Give them a piece of complicated jurisprudence and they will be happy.

'Do not think that blood vengeance is carried out in a burst of sudden rage or excitement. No. It is subject to numerous rules, and you, Georgi, adopted son of Shota Farnavazi, had better know them, so that when you meet your

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sister's abductor you will behave correctly and kill him according to our customs, otherwise his family will call kanly on you and you will die likewise, and then death will come to many of your relatives. This is your cultural heritage and you must know it.'

'Willingly,' I said, as Shota jogged me to fill in the silence Sumi had left.

'If the case was complicated we could call the wise men, the elders of your clan and the abductor's clan, and it could be settled by them, but this is a clear case. But do not think that every blood relative has the right to kill. Murder is not the only thing that demands retribution, nor does every murder require retribution. Actions that may appear harmless in your eyes may demand a feud, and there are some actions, which you plainsmen call crimes, that we do not acknowledge.'

This was all very complicated and I really could not see why I should declare a kanly against my sister's seducer. I wanted my sister back, and not vengeance. But, of course, it would have been absurd of me to say so—they would probably have thought me a monster. So I said, 'Is there no other way except kanly to avenge my sister?'

'Yes,' said Sumi, 'there is. According to the siegni, the blood-prices, it is stated by Bagrat III, King of Georgia, as follows: "Whosoever as a result of divine wrath or at the suggestion of the Devil, renders himself culpable of the murder of your family or causes such murder to be committed by another, shall pay thee 200,000 botinauris of ancient money as *sanakhshiré* (preliminary payment) and as *shesamqrelo* (reconciliation) 400,000 botinauris as the complete blood-price; he who carries off a woman of your family shall pay half this blood-price.'"

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I am afraid this idea did not appeal to me.

‘But do you mean to say I have to sell my sister if he is prepared to pay for her?’

‘Yes. But it is not likely he will be able to pay it. A botinauri is a Byzantine coin taking its name from the Emperor Nikephorpos III Botiniates, and he lived many hundred years ago. One botinauri is worth two of our common tetri. That makes a very large sum.’

Estimated in English money this would mean that the abductor would have to pay somewhere in the region of five thousand pounds sterling for her death and half that sum for the abduction.

‘But what if I disagree and he cannot pay the sum?’

‘Then he would be your kanly. You would have to kill him.’

So the matter had to rest there, and Sumi, the lawyer, continued reading from his book.

‘Why have we resisted the abolition of this law? It is because this law is our only protection against complete anarchy in the mountains. If the threat of blood vengeance did not hang over us, then tribes would rise up against tribes and there would be wholesale wars between families. The iron law of our vendetta exacts retribution where all other laws fail. I will tell you a tale to show you how this law works—sometimes in our favour and sometimes against us. Even though a whole village perish, the law must stand.

‘Not many years ago—it was in 1912, reckoning the Christian way, and the Mohammedan 1291 year, when a brave Chechen warrior and the best soldiers, the Lamrois and others, supported by the whole Caucasus, planned a revolt against the white Tsar. The revolt had every chance of success,

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and the secret had been well kept; but the soldiers of Daghestan approached their chieftain and said, "We have heard, O great captain, that you killed a man from our valley while at play. That was in the days of thy youth. Recollect and tell us if this be true?"

'What could the leader say? He was an honest, brave Caucasian. He admitted the accident. "In that case", said the soldiers, "you are our kanly." So they left him and fought against him and at last managed to surround him, and he had to give himself up to be shot by them. What was the result? The revolt did not take place.

'Now if the leader's "accident" had been discovered on the day the revolt actually started all would have been well, for in war time kanly does not exist. But the revolt had not started and the soldiers could do nothing else but kill their leader. So now, my young friend, you see what the kanly means in the hills?'

I certainly did understand. It was a rigid law, which was taken to such an extreme that it seemed illogical, but it had preserved the Caucasian races from utter extinction. Perhaps in such circumstances it was understandable. Another story somewhat similar to the one told to me by Sumi was recounted about Kerensky, the former head of the government of Russia during the interim period between the Tsar and the Soviet. Simply because he happened to number in his faction a prince who had killed another in Daghestan the whole of Daghestan declared kanly against Kerensky, who, it was deduced according to the mountain laws, was the real kanly's supporter. Had Kerensky known this curious blood-law he might have dismissed his friend, the Caucasian, and the Caucasus might have supported him. This sounds a little

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far-fetched in my opinion, because, whatever may be said of the Caucasians, there were innumerable parties that did not wish to have anything to do with the Russian Whites or Mensheviks like Kerensky.

'How', I asked the lawyer Sumi, in a reverent tone of voice, 'did this blood-feud originate?'

Sumi was pleased to consult his book again.

'It is written', he said, 'in explanation thus. We consider that philosophically speaking there is much to be said for the solution of great injustice by the spilling of blood. You yourselves of the Western world had duels, until you "improved" your legislation and cumbered up your law with many hair-splitting devices, understandable only by your highly trained lawyers. Understand this. It often happens that sentiment and not only property or the body is outraged. What solution is there for such an outrage?'

I pretended to agree with him, hoping to lead him further into argument, and thus show the gathering that I was not without intelligence, as I am afraid most of them must have thought from my questions on their legal-customs 'known to everyone'.

'You will agree that blood is the only vengeance. But you are wrong. It may be. For the very simple and peoples without great culture blood would seem to be the only solution, but in Georgia, from where I come, we have instituted the law of *siskhli*—the blood-price. We have degrees of compensation for every kind of injury. In days gone by, and among some tribes to this day, these blood-prices varied with the classes. If a man killed an equal, then he paid the equal's blood-price as determined by law. If he killed a superior, then he paid his superior's blood-price, which was usually much higher than



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his own price. Sometimes in addition he would suffer loss of property, or mutilation or execution as well.'

I said nothing more, being well content with the explanation, but promised to investigate this matter of law and justice further once I reached Georgia proper.

'You see,' said Shota to me later when we were lying in our sheepskin sleeping-bags, 'in the Caucasus, where there are many families—or as you would call them, "nations"—in these families we include not only our relatives but our nearest friends. You too are now a member of our family and that is why they were so interested in your sister's fate. It is now the concern of them all and they will do everything they can to find her.'

I expressed my gratitude. Somehow I felt that this arrangement was the most perfect devised for a mountainous country, where races or 'families' were divided by valleys and chains of intersecting mountains. There was greater security in belonging to such a family as I now belonged to.

'So you can understand', Shota continued, 'why it is that we think in terms of the family, and the bigger the numbers in a family the greater is its importance. People have been made into princes here, not because of their wisdom but because of the size of their families. If one man dies in a family, or a woman, that makes the family smaller. It weakens it, and correspondingly it strengthens the enemy's family. He must suffer a like loss, otherwise the balance is on his side.'

'I can understand that,' I said, putting my hands under my head and looking out of the open window where the stars were framed, glowing large, 'but I heard Sumi say that this blood-price is often exacted even when a man is killed accidentally by another man. He was referring to the chieftain

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who was going to lead the revolt but who had killed a man by accident. How do you explain that?’

‘Accident or no, it’s beside the point. My head is too full of learning, but I will tell you without prejudice. It is a matter of loss. The man was killed, wasn’t he? The family became less, did it not? That is sufficient. It is not the killing, the assassination, that is punished, but the loss involved. If the murder takes place in the killer’s own family, he is in fact one relation the poorer, and should the family punish the murderer they would lose two members of the family instead of one.’

I don’t know why this argument made me think of the capital-abolitionist’s argument, but it runs on the same lines as Shota’s.

‘Blood vengeance between relatives is not allowed. He who kills his brother or his cousin or even his father is called a fool.’

‘But why should my sister’s abduction be considered in terms of blood vengeance or its substitute—the blood-price?’

‘She’s a loss to you, isn’t she? Your family becomes one less. If your cows or sheep are stolen, or your sister’s honour violated, then it is considered a loss. But it is murder that is most punished with blood vengeance. And to that there are many rules, many regulations.’

I did not question Shota further, but when we left the aul and went once more into the mountains he told me the whole etiquette of this elaborate code of blood vengeance.

It appears that as soon as a murder is discovered in the family and the death of the person is established as caused by an outsider, the whole family takes up arms and lays siege to the aul or house of the murder’s family. The men of the guilty family cannot move out of their houses for fear of being shot, and it subsequently became a matter of strict law that they

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should not move out even if their strength or their accuracy of fire was greater than that of the besiegers. But the most interesting part of this somewhat bizarre arrangement is that the besiegers can support themselves, on the besieged persons' fodder, sheep, and chickens, until the moment that a treaty is concluded between the two enemies giving the besieged the right to move about their houses and courtyards without fear of being shot at. This 'permission' is granted after substantial sums of money are paid to the besiegers. The besieged then withdraw, but leave watchmen to observe the movements of the closer relations of the murderer. Should one of these relatives leave the house and make a dash for it, a halloo is raised and the grand hunt starts. The unfortunate man can find no safety anywhere. Let him walk a street, go into the meadows, or even in prayer, his enemies are ready for him with their guns and swords. Wretched man, he can only creep out at night, and life becomes a constant misery for him. Not only are his nerves frayed, but the pockets of his family also, for ever so often the besiegers come and demand money to guarantee the liberty and safety of persons moving about in their own house and courtyards. It so happens that a family may be enslaved by this means for a considerable time, for the besieger can live as long as he pleases on the bounty of the murderer's family—until, that is, the blood vengeance has been exacted. Then, and then only, are the unhappy beleaguered family free to go about their business again.

'Many are the families that have become rich at the expense of their kanlys, their blood enemies,' Shota told me.

'But surely if you kill one member of the family and his family avenges his death, won't the killing go on and on, each family avenging every death which occurs?'

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'No. The law is very strict on that point. Once the blood is paid, then there is no more quarrel between the families. But if a number of persons are killed as a result of a blood-feud over one man, then the besieged family may declare their kanly against a corresponding number of the enemy's family.'

'And the vengeance goes on?'

'I'm afraid it does. It used to be that almost every man in ten had something to do with a blood-feud. He was either running away from vengeance or seeking to pay it.'

'It must be dangerous in that case to introduce two Caucasians to each other', I said, 'before you find out whether they are blood-enemies or not?'

Shota nodded his head.

'Such is the law of the mountains.'

But still more odd, I discovered, was the law of killing in self-defence. Manslaughter of any kind was unrecognized. If a thief tries to get into your window and he slips and breaks his neck, you, the proprietor of the house, are responsible for his death! And what is more, his family may declare a kanly against you! Why didn't you build your house more carefully so that he, when the devil drove him to steal, need not have killed himself, they would say.

Another subtle point. If you give a man your dagger to cut up some mutton and he forgets to return it, and later kills a man with it, both he and you (as the real owner of the weapon) are responsible for the murder. Codified, the law would probably read, 'He who intentionally or accidentally, with forethought or without, causes the death of any man, by act, or by proxy, or through the medium of his property, is a murderer and against him the law of blood vengeance operates.'

Sumi the lawyer's comment on all this is illuminating. He

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was travelling with us as far as the next aul and took a very active part in explaining these mysteries to me.

'And so you can see that we in the Caucasus consider human life the most precious thing in the whole world. Where else would you find such a law?'

Where else indeed!

'But', he admitted, when he saw my rather sour face, 'we realize that in some cases murder is without doubt unintentional and God is good and we are able to make the avengers keep peace.'

'Yes,' said Shota, 'but how long does it take to settle these accounts with them? It sometimes takes a whole lifetime. I remember how, many years ago, my brother had a horse stolen from him, and the stupid thief did not realize the fire in the nature of that excellent animal. He fell off and killed himself, and what do you think the thief's family demanded?'

'I don't know, but surely they didn't demand blood vengeance?'

'Nearly. They asked whether they could cut off one of my uncle's ears, or a thumb, and sprinkle the blood on the dead man's grave. They also demanded a pretty heavy blood-price—but we were a rich family and could pay the price, although for many years afterwards the thief's family treated us as inferiors.'

'And it is known', continued Sumi, 'that poor families have often killed a man from among themselves and blamed the relatives of a rich family, and on the money they obtained from the blood-price they have waxed fat and rich.'

'But is that just?'

'It is not just, but the law of blood-price is just, therefore we have to tolerate the smaller injustice that the larger justice may be respected,' Sumi answered with all the erudition of an Oriental.

## Chapter 4

# CHECHENIA

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From Daghestan, the land of the mountains, we made for Chechenia, crossing wide rivers at fords and by bridges, and meeting jungles where the law of the Koran and the mountains is not known. We did not find these places inhabited, perhaps for the simple reason that we decided not to penetrate into the forests, but kept sedulously to the outskirts.

‘No man has been in those bushes,’ said Shota, ‘and he would be a fool to adventure into them. But once upon a time people lived there. Look upon this shrine.’

He pointed to a small stone altar, a mere pile of stones which I would have mistaken for a natural mound. ‘Here were strange folk, long forgotten, worshipping the sun and the moon. Whence they came we do not know, but they brought their gods with them, and the greatest of them was the Mother-God, and after her came Armazi and Ga and Gatsi. If you look, you will be able to see inscriptions on these altar stones. I have often seen them and marvelled at man’s cry for God. When we come to the land of the Khevsurs I shall tell you more about them, but now we are in Chechenia, and we must ask whether anyone has seen your sister and her abduc-

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tor. Remember this one thing. The people here are very proud. But as we cross the valley to Shatoi, we shall come across many different people, some of whose languages I do not know. Be not surprised at this. For in these valleys live people who are completely unrelated, and as I have told you before, they speak as many as two hundred different languages.'

'But why is that? Surely—people move from their valleys and meet their neighbours and trade with them?' I asked.

'No, that is dangerous. Only the robber, the man they call the Abrek does that. He and the muzzien, the preacher, are able to go from valley to valley, and they speak and write Arabic, a language I understand. Fear not, therefore, for among these people there are one or two who can speak Arabic.'

Arabic was the language of the Koran and many of these tribes had taken the religion of Mohammed.

'Some from laziness,' Shota informed me. 'But the language is not known to all. It has to be studied. There is, however, a fairly common language that we call Azerbaijani, which is understood by the common people.'

'A language', said Sumi, 'that is not fit for princes.'

'Then I suppose the princes speak Arabic?'

'Not at all,' answered Sumi, who had attached himself to us for the rest of the journey to Shatoi in Chechenia. 'The princes have a language of their own. A sacred language not understood by the washerwoman and the slave. It is known as the hunting language.'

I was very impressed by Sumi's knowledge, but Shota had, I suspect, a secret contempt for the lawyer, and when he said, 'And tell us, wise one, whether you know the language of the

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princes?' I knew that Shota was doing his best to make Sumi feel uncomfortable.

Sumi shifted in his saddle, but he was not to be outdone.

'And if I did, it would be forbidden for me to speak it. Only peers are able to understand. There is no other man in the world but the peer who speaks it.'

'But doest thou?' asked Shota ruthlessly.

'I know many words,' squirmed Sumi, wiping the tip of his nose with his saffron-coloured palms, 'No man knows more than I. They would not teach me, the descendant of Darius and Xerxes, but I discovered five words.'

'But those five words I also know,' said Shota indifferently. '*Shapka*, for instance, means horse, *ami* water, *amafa* blood—tell me the other two.'

'*Azaz*, a gun. *Ashopshka*, a coward. God grant that the number of thy family increase and those of thy enemy may diminish, for thou art a wise man, Shota el Farnavazi, nephew of Khan Jahan.'

Shota smiled at the Persian's politeness. He knew he had parried well with Sumi, the great lawyer, descendant of Darius and Xerxes.

I had not been listening to their conversation a great deal. My eyes were busy scanning the hills, trying to see whether I could find signs of habitation. We had been riding many miles, over ragged countryside, and my back was aching terribly. Besides, I had remained very silent, and silence makes a journey seem long. At last I saw what looked like a tower in a fairy story.

'A castle!' said I. 'Can we not enter it and rest?'

'Allah forbid,' said Sumi, turning up his stained palms to heaven and nearly falling off his horse. 'These people are



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poor. God protect us from them. It may be thought that we are relatives.'

'He means, my son,' Shota said when he saw my puzzled expression, 'that these persons are not princes, as you thought at first, but persons who are poor in families. You see, one of their family killed a man, but the family was very small and weak and could not protect itself against the blood-avengers, so they fled to the tops of mountains and raised themselves a small tower, from which they keep a constant look-out, imprisoned as it were—and yet possessing their lives.'

'How long do they have to stay there?'

'Sometimes all their lives, unless they have relatives in other valleys who will come and rescue them and do battle with the avengers and drive them off.'

'But how do these poor people manage to live?'

'They drive up their flocks and take whatever goods they have in their aul, but even this is rare, more often the men fly with their women and children and barricade themselves behind the stones. Years pass and either the kinsmen of the murdered man depart or those in the tower come out and face their bullets. Once a day only may persons visit them, and then they bring them food and water.'

'I know of a tribe', said Sumi, who probably felt that Shota had been talking too long, 'that was besieged for more than twenty years because the family was small and could not defend itself. In time children were born and they were armed as they grew up, and they fought the avenging family. And that explains why in wishing my friend Shota el Farnavazi well, I blessed him with an increase in family. He will need it.'

The last sentence was very mystifying and I was about to ask for an explanation when Shota said, 'Let us go up to

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those people, they look like Chechens to me, and ask them whether we may stay for the night on their hospitality.'

So we rode up to them, and suffered the glare of their rifle-barrels right up in our faces.

'Are you these murderers' kinsmen?' they asked. 'If so there is blood-money to pay if you wish to enter their aul unmolested.' Their eyes glittered in greedy anticipation.

'No,' said Shota with great nobility. I noticed that Sumi had taken a very inferior position and was well behind. 'We are travellers also seeking a blood-price, for we have lost my adopted son's sister. Which of you is the prince of the tribe?'

The men looked at each other, clearly offended.

'Stranger,' they said, 'we know not who you are, but know you this. We are Chechens and we are all princes. There is no rank among us as there is among others in the mountains.'

'But which of you commands?' Shota asked.

'Commands? There is no such word in our parlance.'

Shota was speaking in Arabic and translating it for my benefit.

'You see what strange people these are?' he said to me in Russian. 'Then whom are we to ask for hospitality? We wish to rest.'

'You ask us all,' came the reply, 'for we are all equals.'

A more elderly man spoke precisely.

'We have little hospitality to offer, for we have watched our enemy for many months now and do not know when we shall return to our aul in the valley below. But if you will rest on these stones with us you are welcome. If not go on your way.'

Sumi and Shota exchanged glances, but before they could make their decision known, one of the men said, 'You are not ashuks, are ye?'

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'No. I am a master of the law and a prince in my own country,' said Sumi boastfully, 'but my friend here can tell you many tales and sing a song. He is an ashuk.'

Whether this was true or not I can't tell, but Shota played the role of ashuk well enough. We all descended from our horses and I observed how very reverentially the Chechens behaved to Shota. They took our horses and tethered them with their own, saying they would feed them. They then invited us into a large tent, and calling the whole family together, they introduced Shota.

'This man is an ashuk,' they said, 'therefore let him sit at the head of the company and he and his friends eat mutton with us and busa.'

While preparations were being made for our reception, Shota went a little aside and began to look upon the hills.

'What is he doing?' I asked Sumi.

'He is thinking.'

'What?'

'He is composing a tale. That is what the ashuks do. They are the writers, the journalists of the mountains, telling the tales of the mountains, bringing the news from the different valleys, informing the people of wars, of great happenings. He is an important man in the hills. He makes public opinion—a sort of walking newspaper that all can read. He can stir people up and make them shed their blood in some worthy cause. He can soothe them with quieter stories of the lands beyond the mountains. And he is greatly honoured.'

It was when the meat dish was brought in and we all dipped our hands into the potage and brought out pieces of mutton and rice that Shota began playing his role. I might mention that Shota was by no means an ashuk, but any man may claim

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that distinction if he can tell an interesting enough story. And the story Shota had to tell was as interesting as it was subtle.

'It is written thus in a book,' began Shota, as all wise men begin. 'When God, the all wise, decided on the Great Flood, he preserved two animals of each kind to put into our Father Noah's ark, but when the dreadful waters arose and threatened to over-swamp the earth and kill all living men, the Merciful One, the omnipotent decided that he would save one of every nation. And he hid these people among the peaks of the mountains, mountains higher than the sacred Ararat, on which the ark still stands, as all true believers know. It is from these people that the mountain races are descended. But they were not allowed to multiply in numbers too much, since the valleys, the Holy One knew, were appointed to shelter other men who were to come after the flood. And you and I, Caucasians, must stay in the mountains as a memory of God's mercy and vengeance. So it is written in the book.'

Nobody asked Shota in what book this legend was written, but I knew, or rather I could see from the people's faces, that they were already familiar with this story and probably loved, like the simple children that they were, to hear it again and again. It was, however, only an introduction to what Shota really had to say.

'It is clear, therefore,' Shota said in a ringing voice, speaking with great authority in the Azerbaijani that most of those present on the floor before the great rice dish understood, 'it must be clear to you that most of us in the hills are brothers, or at least, we are kinsmen in some fashion. If this be said to be untrue, then how was it that God kept you Chechens in the valley—all Chechens and not Avars or Ingushes, but all Chechens?'

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No-one knew the answer.

'Then if we are all Chechens ye are all brothers. Are the men ye fight against Chechens?'

'They are,' said one of our hosts.

'But do ye exact blood vengeance from brothers? Ye do not. Then if these be Chechens—why do ye exact blood vengeance?'

'Because they are not of our family,' was the answer.

'But as Chechens ye are of one family and ye live in one valley. Now I, and many ashuks with me, have decreed that the blood-feud should stop. We are many princes and priests and wise men and we decree the blood-feud shall stop.'

These words fell like hammer-blows on Shota's listeners, and Sumi's face wore an expression of horror. He moved his hands to his dagger, but remembered that he was using it to cut mutton, and he sat with bemused expression on his face, waiting for the worst.

'And we have said', Shota continued bravely, 'that the blood-feud shall stop, otherwise rivers of blood shall flow and every nation in our fair land shall perish. Chechen, raise not thy hand against thy brother. So spake God to Cain.'

'But it is our law; our custom that a man's death shall be avenged,' someone protested. 'And this law is older than the most reverend ashuk.'

'Very well,' said Shota, 'then I, ashuk and friend of princes, and Sumi, the lawyer, descendant of Darius, and my adopted son, Georgi, shall kneel before you. Thus.' And with those words Shota, Sumi, and I stood up and went down on our knees. The Chechens were clearly astonished. This humbleness from an ashuk was galling to them, but they said,

'Such are our laws.'

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Sumi and I followed Shota carefully. I only now realized what Shota was trying to do, but what was his motive?

He spoke again.

'We have knelt before you, but we know that you are all princes, therefore there is no shame in it. But we will kiss your feet.' Whereupon Shota moved forward and kissed everyone's feet in turn. Sumi and I followed disconsolately behind, doing our best not to kiss too hard.

Tears came into the eyes of the Chechens, but they still said, 'Those are our laws and we cannot change them.'

Then (to Sumi's and my horror) Shota stood up and throwing up his hands said, 'Children of the Chechens, if you do not forgive your enemies, we shall take a rope and hang ourselves.'

'And our families will come and avenge us,' Sumi put in, but quickly corrected himself. 'It is not for vengeance that we ask you to do this, but for love.'

Suddenly, and without any sort of warning, the Chechens arose from the floor and also flung themselves on the ground.

'It is hard for us, hard, but we will forgive our enemies rather than good men like you should hang yourselves.' And then they began weeping, and they got up, and staggered to the end of the tent, and elected a messenger who would bear a peace message to the belligerents and declare peace to them. But some of the men refused and they said that even if we hanged ourselves on their doorsteps they would slay their enemy. The counsels of the majority however decided in our favour and a messenger was dispatched. He went and returned with the whole of the family against whom Kanly had been pronounced.

We could see that this family was very poor. There were

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but five men and ten women and some small children, and they looked very ill and starved, so we stayed to watch the spectacle of their former enemies feeding them.

'How long', murmured Sumi ironically, 'will this peace last?'

'As long as the men in the mountains are told that all men are their brothers. For that time will peace last,' Shota answered.

'Then you belong to the men with the star?' Sumi asked in astonishment. 'Is it for that you left the mountains and went to the plains?' But Shota did not answer. Instead, when friend and enemy had fed their stomachs, he began telling them a different tale. He began to praise them, and the Chechens are notoriously fond of praise. You can steal from a Chechen if you praise him enough, runs a proverb.

'Now there is peace among you, go back to the wooded hills, and the gently sloping valleys, for your land is one of the most beautiful in the world.'

It was true. When we reached Shatoi, we went on to a place with a somewhat similar name, Shatil, down the river Argun, and we passed through a most luxurious country. The land seemed very fertile, and heavily wooded with oak trees, which grew to an enormous size, and sometimes stood so close together that they resembled a gigantic palisade. Sheep and buffaloes and pigs we saw, and sometimes the rare and almost extinct Caucasian bison.

'Strong are ye, and very lithe, like fine blades,' continued Shota. And that was true also. The Chechens are a strikingly handsome people, with well-moulded limbs, and daring eyes, ever alert, keen, and sometimes full of animal cunning.

'Your women are proud and beautiful and your men are

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arrogant, great talkers, makers of wars and battles, brave as the mountain leopard. I have heard men say that ye are reckless; when ye laugh the sounds are like streams and silver bells; ye are honourable without thought, faithful and generous.'

He might have said that these peasants—who called themselves princes—all of them, were great noblemen as well. They have fine manners and they insist on manners from other people. Governors of the Caucasus sent by the Tsars found that they could never command the Chechen to do anything. He would always have to request. Thus a committal order frequently read, 'It is the pleasure of the Governor to request the Prince Such-and-such to spend five years in jail for stealing from a bank convoy.' For these men were the last of the great robber barons of the Caucasus known as the Lamrois. Not all Chechens or Cherkesses are Lamrois. The best of them only entered into that brotherhood of bandits, if it can be called a brotherhood.

They know nothing of government or authority, and when those twin civilizers come into contact with the prince-bandits the Lamroi, it is often the agents of civilization who get worsted in the fight.

'I have heard', said Shota, 'that in days long ago you called upon a foreign prince to rule you and to lead you into battle, isn't that so?'

The men who understood this anecdote, this subtle allusion to their valour, smiled and agreed that they had.

'We asked him to defend us against our enemies so that we might live in peace,' they said ironically.

Well, and what happened? The prince came and ruled over them. He agreed to accept half the loot they captured, but in



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the end he himself fled. He ran away as fast as he could after a few years of his 'rule'. Never again, said he, would he accept the chieftainship of the mountains. They treated him like a domestic, and sent him out on dangerous expeditions with his own men and went off themselves to fight for more profitable booty, so that they collected from both sides.

'And since that time every Chechen is a prince and makes his own laws, obeying them if he wishes or forgetting them when convenient for him.'

Sumi felt that he was being left out again and had to chirrup in with a story.

'My father', he said, 'was a very wise man and he told me a story of how a Russian prince once came to Chechenia and walked into the sakyla of a Chechen. The young Chechen did not stand up, although he must have known that the man before him was a great prince, for he wore great jewels on his breast and his retainers were in fine cloth of gold and wore handsome daggers. "Know you not who I am?" said the Prince. "I do not," answered the young Chechen. "And who are you?" asked the prince. "I am a great prince, a relative of the Tsar in Moscow," "And what is a prince?" asked the Chechen boldly. The Russian smiled at the Chechen's ignorance and said, "He is a very important man. He is very powerful, with many servants and fine lands. He is almost the greatest man on earth." The Chechen did not stand up, but seated as he was he asked, "And tell me, who is there between this great man and God?" "Nobody but the Tsar," answered the prince proudly. "Well, between me and God there is nobody, so why should I honour you? Quite the opposite, you should honour me." With that he turned round and showed the prince his back.'

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'Ha, ha!' roared the Chechens. They relished this sort of a tale, made up or true, and Sumi's account went down well with them.

'These people are very proud,' said Shota to me in Russian while the disturbance was on. 'And they insist on respect. They are very touchy. The slightest word or action, even a movement of the hand, will drive them into dreadful fury. I've seen them going raving mad, and they say an incensed Lamroi is more dangerous than all the leopards in Chechenia. They jump in the saddles and run amok, dashing through the hills shouting at the top of their voices, and if they meet anyone who displeases them they cut off their heads, or pierce them through with a dagger. So be careful.'

I learnt later from Shota that these curious people are insulted by the most trivial things and many things that we could consider as insulting they pass by and forgive, even laugh about them; but the dangers attendant on such a journey as I made in the Caucasus will be better established if I say that these Lamrois had record tempers. They went into a boiling heat on the least provocation, and if they couldn't stab you they would sink their daggers into themselves, so unbearable was it for them to suffer any kind of 'dishonour'. But as fighters they were greatly esteemed in Russia, and I have heard that special rooms were set aside for these fiery gentlemen whenever they got into a state 'of being insulted', where their own national weapons could be found. He was thrust into such a room by a military guard of five or six men and there allowed to extinguish his anger by tearing up the floorboards and cutting up the furniture and breaking any crockery to be found. Expenses for these orgies were paid by the Government, although they happened frequently enough.

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After an hour or so of temper, peacemakers would come in to see him and offer him the 'price'—a sort of appeasement tax. This usually took the form of a beanfeast and the 'insulted' man would feel much better after it and leave the place of confinement for the carpenters, who came to mend it and prepare it for the next Lamroi who got insulted.

'Now what are the means of insulting a Lamroi?' I asked Shota timidly, some time after our adventure with the Chechens. 'Would he be hurt if you called him a fool?'

'Not at all. Abuse has little effect on him. He considers it an insult against the abuser for the man to call him a fool, he is so conceited. But what stings him to helpless fury is some implication that he, a great and noble Lamroi, cannot do something or another. Woe then to the man that says it!'

'For instance,' said Sumi, ever anxious to elaborate Shota's good stories, 'never be indifferent to a Lamroi, even unintentionally. Listen patiently and reverentially to what he has to say. I've known plenty of cases of men being stabbed to death simply because they did not know how to address his highness a Lamroi. An abrupt refusal to understand and sympathize may bring about the most terrible of disasters. I was once present when a Lamroi led a son of his who was suffering from some disease or other to a friend of mine, an alchemist and a very busy man, who quite honestly knew very little about the art of medicine, and when the Lamroi asked him to look at his son, he said, "I know nothing about medicine. My good fellow, why don't you go to someone who does?" Result: one dead alchemist. What he should have said was, "My esteemed and noble friend, I will do all in my power to aid your ailing son, but my knowledge is very limited in such matters and could not be of any possible aid

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to one as magnificent as your good self. I suggest therefore that you visit a Christian doctor." But that is not all. It is necessary to repeat every few words how completely devoted you are to the Lamroi and his family and progenitors, and how much you sympathize with his son's headache, and in fact stress that you suffer the acutest pain in not being able to help him. Thus only can you get on with a Lamroi.'

Queer folk, these Lamroi. But it was these same Lamroi who, with countless other Caucasian tribes, held up the march of Rome's great empire, saying 'Thus far and no farther'. Comic, absurdly comic sometimes, noble and futile, they have loved liberty as only mountain folk can—be they the Swiss, the Scots, or the Caucasians.

'But when such a one is insulted,' said Shota, 'and he can be insulted not only by an individual such as you or I, but by a court that fines him or summons him for some misdemeanour, then this Lamroi announces that he is mortally offended.'

'How does he do that?' I asked innocently.

'Why he goes to some ruined temple, not knowing even to what god the temple was built, and there he raises up his hand and swears that he is an "offended man" and that he will remain so as long as there is breath in his body. I do not know the exact words, for I do not hold with these practices. You had better ask Sumi. He will tell you.'

Sumi, who I think was still nursing some grievance over Shota's attempt to reform the Chechens in the matter of the blood-feud, now brightened up. He said, 'As a lawyer and a teacher of the law, it is my business to know all the things that are done in the mountains. I have often been called upon to arbitrate in cases between Lamrois, for they do not recog-

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nize any court or any jurisdiction, but they love listening to the law. Indeed, I remember drawing up, on one particular occasion, a document for an "eternally offended man". If my memory does not fail me, I wrote it in Arabic and sent it to his family. This is what he commanded me to write.

' "I, a Lamroi, the lawful son of an honourable father, servant of Allah, do swear by the stones of this holy place and by the bones of our father Abraham and his wife Sarah, that I am a man eternally offended. For a number of years"—and here he specified the years—"I shall become an abrek, a robber. And during each one of these years I shall shed human blood and shall have no thought and no mercy for any man. I shall hunt him, and slay him. I shall steal all that my hands can lay hold on, all that is precious and dear to the sons of men. I shall burden their conscience, and laugh at their valour. This shall I do. I shall slay the babe as it suckles its mother's breast. I shall burn the shelter of the poor, and wherever I find happiness, I shall bring gloom and sorrow. If this oath I do not fulfil, or allow any drop of pity to enter my bosom, then may I never see the burial place of my ancestors, and may water never enter my mouth to rid me of thirst, nor any morsel of bread come into my belly, and may my carcass when it is dead lie in the roadway and be sullied by every passing animal." '

'That is a dreadful oath,' said Shota, 'but it is a proud one. These people are not as evil as they imagine, and one day all these things will change.'

'Change?' said Sumi. 'Does Shota el Farnavazi the Georgian set the customs of the mountains at naught.'

'I did not say that,' said Shota. 'I only believe that the cus-

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toms will change of themselves when life becomes easier in the mountains.'

'And when will that be?' Sumi the lawyer sneered, curling up his eyebrows like a piqued woman.

'Soon,' said Shota, 'for the time is at hand.'

I felt that I could intervene and interpose curiosity to smooth out the conversation.

'And does this Lamroi really become offended for all time and against all people?' I asked.

'No,' said Sumi. 'His period of remaining offended is stated in his oath and also the people he is particularly offended with. He need not wage war on all humanity unless the insult is particularly terrible. He can declare his enemies to be some profession—say doctors or lawyers he has been unable to cheat, or he may hate judges or Russians or any other kind of offensive people who have disturbed him.'

'There are no people who are offensive,' said Shota quietly. 'It is time the people in the hills realized that.'

Sumi hesitated for a moment, not sure whether he should continue speaking with me or take up verbal cudgels with Shota again. He decided that I was the easier of the two victims.

'When the time comes for him to stop being an abrek—a bandit and killer—he leaves for some unknown place, a valley removed from his own people, and settles down there. But it is rarely that he can escape the daggers of other blood-avengers who come to slay him for the murders he has committed as an "offended man". For the others do not recognize his oath, and although they fear these Lamrois, they fight against them boldly.'

'But where did these Lamroi originate? What place did they come from?'

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'It is difficult to say. I have met them in all sorts of places, small isolated communities. They are very primitive and some of them know nothing of the Koran. They live in great poverty, but they are a hospitable people, and think themselves the greatest lords on this earth, and whenever a stranger passes through their midst they always seize him and make him listen to their proofs of greatness.'

'Not a difficult task,' said Shota, 'considering that they have very little history to be proud or ashamed of. They are abysmally ignorant.'

'They do not belong to any one race, but are a combination of tribes that have wandered from Asia, perhaps, got lost, and finding some other wanderers among the mountain tops, they join together and call themselves Lamroi. A hundred years are enough for these people to get thoroughly mixed and to talk three or four different languages and to tell legends that are common to all the Caucasus, but legends of which we know nothing. Tales of the Moguls in India, Jenghiz Khan, and General Pompey.'

I appeared from what Sumi said that these people suffered from a great inferiority complex. They were for ever having to 'establish' themselves in their own and in other people's eyes. They spoke of their race superiority, yet belonged to a hundred different races, but to all appearances they were not different from their neighbours. In utter desperation, I should imagine, they used to say as a sort of final trump, 'Anyway, whoever we may be, whatever we do, one thing is certain and that proves that we are the best people in the world, our language is the most difficult in the world.'

'They consider it a sign of great intelligence that their language is difficult,' Shota said, 'but that is not altogether true.'

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The Avars, for instance, whose country lies some sixty miles west of Shatil, have a language that has no sounds capable of being written. They make strange clicking sounds with their tongues.'

'It's a language of bottle-gurglers!' exclaimed Sumi, not to be outdone in knowledge of the Avar language. 'But a far more difficult language is spoken by the Tabasars. They claim that the man who could really speak their language properly died some thirty years ago! They use a language borrowed from the people of the next valley, because it takes them so long to remember the correct form of their own!'

'Talking of languages,' said Shota, 'we in the Caucasus have so many without alphabets. 'The Ingushes, for instance, have been trying to find one, but simply cannot find one that will represent all their queer sounds. The Circassians are another race without an alphabet, so what do you think they say? "Our beautiful tongue is much too dignified and great to be held together by signs."'

'In my opinion it is the Abkhasians whose language is the most unpronounceable,' Sumi informed me, 'but don't you ever say that to a Lamroi. He will be mortally offended.'

I must say I was a little puzzled why Shota and Sumi both impressed me with the ferocity of the Lamroi, but my innocent wonder was soon melted when we entered one of these Lamroi villages.

'We have to pass through the aul,' said Shota, pointing to the road before us, 'because there's no other road across this mountain. So brace yourself up, Georgi, and be ready for anything.'

'We don't have to change into any particular colour of suit, do we?' I asked.



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Shota and Sumi both laughed.

'No. Just take care not to offend any of them and we'll be all right.'

We rode boldly into the village, suffering with bowed heads the curious glances bestowed on us. But it appeared that Sumi, the lawyer, was known to the community and we were not molested.

'Not all the Lamrois live here,' said Sumi to me, 'but the village is expanding quickly.'

'But what do they do here?'

'What do you mean—do?' asked Sumi. 'Lamrois do nothing but steal, especially if they are poor.'

'But are they allowed to?' I ventured.

'Of course. All the people you see here are poor Lamrois. They came to the village as poor as beggars, but being Lamrois they cannot be called that, nor is anyone allowed to offer them alms or shelter—it would be an insult. So he is allowed to steal. He can steal as much as he likes and no-one can stop him. That's his right. But he can only do that for seven years. After that he must settle down with his stolen goods and wait for newcomers to arrive, who will in turn steal from him. But should he revert to the habit of stealing after seven years as a Lamroi, he can be punished. His hands or feet can be cut off.'

I must say, from general observation, that these shaggy-haired people, with hazel eyes and slim figures, are very polite. I remember an interesting scene I and Shota witnessed while Sumi was away on some legal business, arbitrating, I think.

Two neighbours, both Lamrois, had some chickens. The chickens of one of them were more prolific than the other's, and every day after the hens had laid, the luckier Lamroi

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handed over some of his eggs to his less fortunate neighbour. I was very moved by this Christian act and asked Shota the reason for it.

‘Oh, that’s not Christianity or brotherly love,’ said Shota. ‘If the man with the many eggs did not give half of his supply to his less fortunate neighbour, it would be a dreadful insult. It would imply that the less fortunate man’s chickens were inferior, and that would be an insult to the man. It would be very tactless of him to enjoy so many eggs and so imply the inferiority of his neighbour’s chickens.’

More cases of the same fine sense of tact were found whenever anything happened to a Lamroi’s livestock or if his house was damaged by a storm. His neighbours would immediately replace his sheep and mend his house for him. It would be a most terrible insult not to do so.

‘You know, if you were a Lamroi and your sister was abducted, they would go to the extent of finding another one for you. A neighbour with many sisters would probably give you one of his,’ said Shota. Such generosity, I must say, I should not have appreciated!

## Chapter 5

### GUESTS OF THE ROPE

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We were now on the outskirts of Georgia, by the river Argava, or, to give it its Georgian name, Terti Argavi—meaning the White Argava. As yet it was nothing but a shallow stream, clear and rambling, but Shota could not help stopping by it.

‘Chavchavadze, poet of Georgia, wrote poems to this river,’ he said, and recited :

*‘How sweet, Argava, ’tis to love thee  
And bitter, bitter too.  
’Twas on your banks that life was sweet,  
When freedom and the country flowered.*

And all Georgians revere this river. She is a symbol of our freedom.’

‘Oh, you Georgians, for ever wanting to be free,’ Sumi, the lawyer, complained.

We were going to leave Sumi in Tiflis, and I must say that Shota would be well rid of him. I had no objections to Sumi ; I found him amusing and knowledgeable, though in a narrow way. Why he and Shota should quarrel I could not tell.

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They did not quarrel openly, but I felt a strange under-current going on all the time, and when Sumi made his last remark about freedom I could see that Shota was thoroughly annoyed, although, as usual, he was perfectly controlled. Only his eyes shone fiercely and his long moustaches curled defiantly, as if to say, 'What does a Persian know of freedom?' I did not know Shota well enough to know that he had quite different thoughts. I found that out later.

'Esteemed Sumi,' he said, 'all people need freedom and the moment is at hand.'

That is what he always said. Sumi made no reply, so Shota continued with his quotation.

'Another verse of his beautiful poem goes :

*Of life, Argava, you're still full,  
But as a grave, a grave I love you,  
You are the spot all hallowed ever  
Where sunk and sleeps my native land.*

But come, I must put away all sad thoughts, for this is Georgia.'

'It is not Georgia,' Sumi argued. 'It is Khevsuria, to be accurate. My young friend, we are entering into the land of the Khevsurs.'

'And we shall pass by,' said Shota definitely.

'But how pass by? Are you not seeking your son's sister? What better places there for the abductor than in Khev-suria?'

'That is true,' said Shota. I liked the way he always admitted a mistake. 'We might go there, but I fear it is very dangerous, and I do not know how he could have taken the girl there.'

'Why is that?'

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‘You shall see.’

So we travelled to the land of the Khevsurs, some twenty miles south, still keeping to the mountain passes. The journey itself was remarkably silent, but it gave me a chance to look round and notice the country.

An amazing change in colour took place before my eyes. I had grown accustomed to the greyness of the hills, the powdery blue mist, and the amazing abundance of coloured flowers in the valley, together with the innumerable strongholds in Shatil, but here in Georgia everything seemed to be covered with a gold dust, a bright yellow colour like Sauterne wine. This reflection came not only from the munificent sun, which shone with warm but not uncomfortable insistence, but from the soil itself, which was of the same colour, giving a vapour, or atmosphere as it were, of brightness. No wonder the Greeks called this the Land of the Golden Fleece! When I saw sheep grazing in the sloping meadows I could see the bright shimmer of their wools. They looked as if they had been turned out by Cellini!

Alluvial deposits from the water, golden rain, or some other simple chemical reason must have dyed them gold, but what made the air so pure and light I did not know. The vines, the small, flat-roofed villages, all these shone in an aurora of gold. Had Midas been here and touched each rock, each tree, each sheep?

I was awakened from my musing by a sudden shout, and turning round I saw that Shota was riding furiously towards me. I had apparently strayed from him and Sumi, and when I noticed my surroundings I found that I was some twenty yards away from the edge of a cliff!

‘We shouted to you,’ said Shota out of breath, ‘but you

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went on your way, my son. It is dangerous. We are near the khevi.'

'Khevi' means valley in Georgian and the Khevsurs are dwellers of the valley, of this particular valley, surely the strangest and most thrilling in all the world?

'We must dismount,' said Shota, getting off his horse. 'And leave our horses here. There is no path to the valley.'

'Then how do we get down?' I asked.

'By a rope.'

'A rope?'

'A long rope made of hemp. We have to swing from it some fifty feet to a ledge, and from there there is a small path that will lead us into the valley of the Khevsurs.'

'It's a wonder to me how you know all these things,' I said, as we made our way to the cliff's edge.

'I came here once long ago. I will tell you one day,' Shota answered.

The edge of a cliff, did I say? It was a ravine, cut into a U shape, some two hundred feet in depth, and there beyond in the gold haze we could see the valley. That was three or four thousand feet down.

'Here', said Shota, 'is the place where we descend.'

He pointed to a long, thickish strand of rope and felt its serviceableness by tugging at it once or twice. 'I think it's safe, but you must keep a steady head. Coming Sumi?'

Sumi had gone an unhealthy-looking colour and was peering on his knees over the abyss.

'No, no,' he stuttered, 'I have no business there. I am going to Tiflis. You and your son can go down to the land of the Khevsurs, but I shall stay up here. I will look after your horses if you like, and wait for you, a day or so.'

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'But aren't you afraid of abreks, of bandits, or Lamrois?' Shota asked with a slight tint of contempt in his voice.

'It is better to meet them than to be swallowed up by a mountain,' said Sumi emphatically. 'The prophet has said, "A wise man is he who knows when not to be courageous," and although you may smile and say that Sumi, the lawyer, is a coward, I will not go down the face of the mountain with you on such a thin rope.'

The enterprise was undoubtedly dangerous. 'But it is the only way of going down into the valley. Everywhere there are cliffs like this and this is the only ledge there is. Are you coming with me, Georgi?'

I must say that for a few moments I felt sympathetic to Sumi. The rope was definitely thin, and despite all Shota's tugging might unexpectedly give way, which would mean a drop of some two hundred feet. But what alternative was there than to risk it? It certainly was an inaccessible place, this valley of the Khevsurs, and therefore it seemed quite likely that my sister's abductor might have chosen it, although how he could have got my sister to cling to the rope and swing some twenty feet in the air to the ledge fifty feet away I did not know.

'Yes, I am coming,' I said, bravely. It would be nice to get away from Sumi in any case, and the land of the Khevsurs had intrigued me. What sort of men could they be that lived in such splendid isolation on the outskirts of populous Georgia?

'I will go down first', said Shota, 'and see if the rope holds.' Then without any further ado he spat on his hands and, seizing the rope, he swung himself slowly down. I saw him curl his feet over the rope, but instead of sliding down it,

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he crept down arm under arm, foot by foot, and then, when he had estimated the distance, he pushed himself away from the rock's face and swung out into space with great agility. The ledge was wide, I was glad to see, but even then it must have been very difficult for Shota to let go of the rope and trust to his feet to break his run. But he did it. Sumi gasped and shuddered. I prepared myself for the ordeal.

'I'll get hold of you as you swing,' Shota yelled. 'Don't be afraid, it's quite easy. Just creep down the rope the way I did and don't look down.'

'What about clothes and our food?' I shouted back.

'Oh, we shan't need them,' Shota answered. 'I've got enough food here in my bag, and there's no need for clothes. The Khevsurs aren't particular people.'

As I saw that no further delaying tactics could keep me from the rope, I followed Shota's instructions as best I could, but not before I had shaken Sumi by the hand. I was very damp and small.

'Allah be with you,' he said, and I said something like 'And the same to you' in Russian to him. Then I seized the rope and began my acrobatic trick.

I could not help wondering, as I swung in space, how one got back, but before I could answer this conundrum, my feet had touched the first ledge on the cliff's face and I was preparing to 'push off'. There was plenty of room for a shove, as the cliff face slanted away from me, and before I knew what had happened I was in mid-air and Shota had got hold of my legs.

'Let go of the rope,' he commanded, but I was not very sure of his hold and held on more grimly than before.

'But let go,' said Shota again.



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I looked at the great U-gap in the mountain and shivered. Shota had only got hold of my ankles. The question was—was he strong enough to hold me like that if I let goof the rope?

‘I’ll jump,’ I said, ‘like you.’

‘No, let go.’

So I let go and for a few dizzy seconds my head swum round and round. Shota’s hands fixed on my calves like vices as he let me slide down a little in his grip, and he swung me like a small child to the ground.

‘There,’ he said. ‘Simple isn’t it?’

‘And how do we get back?’ I asked, voicing my secret fear.

‘Easy enough. There’s another rope here. We swing to the ledge you’ve just come from and climb up the rope.’

It was at that moment that we heard the sound of horses’ hooves.

‘Where’s that coming from?’ I asked, wondering what horses were doing so high up on the mountain. I thought it came from our side, but it did not.

‘It comes from there,’ said Shota with a smile, pointing to the plateau we had just left high above us.

‘Sumi?’

‘Yes. He’s running away. I knew he would. But it doesn’t matter. We can get mules on our way back. They will be more useful.’

‘But why did you leave him the horses?’ I asked.

‘What else could we do? We couldn’t swing the horses down on this flimsy rope, could we?’

I agreed that we could not and immediately began following Shota down the narrow path that led to the valley. As we approached the whole valley opened beneath us, crowded with sunshine, golden.

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'This is the freest place in the world,' said Shota. 'Here no policeman, no lawyer, comes. This is our political Switzerland.'

'But, Shota,' I said with some alarm, 'I didn't know that you were a politician?'

'I'm not,' he answered. 'I'm a servant of politicians.'

'Is that why you left the mountains and came down to Baku?' I asked simply, with all the curiosity and hero-worship of a boy of eighteen.

'It was, but have no fear, I did nothing to compromise your family.'

'What did you do?'

'I stole,' he said, not paying very much attention to me, but shading his eyes with his hand.

'Stole? Did you ever kill anyone?'

'Yes, in my youth. It was an accident.'

'I mean generals.'

'No, the day when you could kill generals with impunity in the Caucasus soon passed.'

'But what did you steal? Money?'

'Yes, money and jewels. Anything of value.'

'But you never took anything from us.'

'No. You were my friends. Your father took me in some twenty years ago. I would not steal from him. It was from the banks and places like that that I stole.'

'How interesting,' I observed, 'and I suppose you could break open safes and such-like?'

'Yes, we had to do that. But I mostly robbed trains and convoys in the mountains.'

'For the politicians?'

'Yes, I suppose so. They used it for the party.'

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'Not for the——'

'Yes.'

That, I must admit, was a shock. My youthful enthusiasm could have imagined Shota's large body riding a great horse, an abrek, a real princely robber capturing maidens and breaking up rich caravans—not for the sake of the money or for some party, but simply for the sake of the glory and the dash.

'I can't understand,' I said sadly. 'You a Bolshevik!'

'You are too young to understand these things,' Shota said, indicating that the conversation was at an end. But I decided to pursue him relentlessly. I secretly admired his cleverness in hiding these activities from my family so long. What a situation! A Bolshevik in our service! A man who told beautiful tales and who had lived with us twenty years—a Bolshevik!

'So that's where you used to disappear to in the summer,' I said with a whistle, implying a solution to this problem that had tortured me in my childhood. Shota would say, 'I'm going to graze sheep. I want to think. Let me go for three months, barin.' And my father would let him go.

'But what made you come here, Shota?'

'It was safe here.'

'Then it wasn't the first time you had descended the rope?'

'No. I came here often after a successful raid. It was the only place I was safe. There are hundreds of us. We know that policemen can't follow us here.'

'But can't they go down that rope?'

'Very few people know it, and those that know would not tell. There are no traitors in the mountains.'

'But haven't they ever sent an expedition against you? Cossacks and people?'

'They have tried, but what's the use. The rope can't hold

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an expedition, and besides the pass we are walking on is free of avalanches and snow for only a few months in a year. At any other time it is almost impassable. Here is peace. The Khevsurs are hospitable folk, and they are good to the refugee.'

Political Switzerland! A mere fifty miles from Tiflis! A revolutionary's paradise. But the people of Khevsuria are quite neutral.

'They don't interest themselves in political problems, because they haven't got any, and they feel sorry for those that have. Let us go down and speak to them and they might give us news of your sister.'

On our long walk to the valley we did not meet anyone, and when I asked Shota why that was he said, 'Oh, they keep to their strongholds and do not mix with us refugees. They give us food and clothing, but otherwise they have little to do with us.'

When we came across one of these strongholds Shota beckoned me to follow him in, and we walked boldly up to the gates of a large building made of granite blocks and wood, and into the courtyard. There we saw a great gathering of people, all talking and laughing among themselves.

'Hey, Shota! Shota!' someone shouted, breaking away from the crowd.

Shota and I stared. He had clearly not expected to meet anyone here, but as soon as the man approached, gesticulating wildly, Shota recognized him. It was Isak ben Ibrihim, a friend of long standing, so Shota told me.

'Isak, why are you here?' Shota asked him, after they had shaken hands.

'I've been sent here.'

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'By the party?'

'Yes. I'm appointed commissar for this district, but I can't make these people understand.'

'What can't you make them understand?'

'What I'm here for. They don't seem to understand what I'm trying to tell them. Perhaps you could help me?'

Isak ben Ibrihim's face was very earnest and unhappy. His red star glimmered weakly in the bright sunshine. The enamel was very worn, but he was a communist commissar, and as such had been asked to bring the Khevsurs round to the right faith. When he recounted his difficulties to Shota, Shota laughed.

'Let us go and ask them to do what you tell them,' he said, taking me by the hand. Isak followed on behind, without any hope, it seemed.

'Friends,' said Shota, 'this man is from Tiflis. He is a good man, and you must listen to what he has to tell you.'

'But he does not talk sense,' said one of the Khevsurs, a very tall, black-bearded man, wearing a curious surtout with a huge black Maltese cross on it. 'He says we are all brothers, but we know that. He says we must share our sheep and our cattle, but we do that. He asks us to be good citizens and to provide education for our children, but we do that. Everything that he says we must do, we have already done. Yet you say he is a man of sense? He ought to be sent to a merciful doctor.'

Poor Isak ben Ibrihim was very crestfallen. Apparently what had happened was that Isak was sent by the party to convert these Khevsurs to Communism, and when he came there he began teaching his gospel according to Marx, only to find that in the rude village community nestling beneath the

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stronghold a sort of primitive communism was already being practised. He could not believe that and thought that the people were hoodwinking him.

‘But I found everything as they said,’ he complained. ‘What can I do?’

‘You can do nothing,’ said Shota. ‘Go back and tell the party what you have seen. When you can give them better teachers, bring them books, and build better roads for them, come then.’

And that was the end of Isak ben Ibrihim’s attempt to impose communism on the Khevsurs! He returned to Tiflis, and was probably laughed at, but this particular tribe of the Khevsurs continued with their co-operative life. Perhaps only now has Isak ben Ibrihim returned to the valley with the books and the engineers to build better roads and make a pass into Khevsuria, and the red star he wore in his cap is brighter and bigger. If not, the Khevsurs are living very much the same lives as they have led for centuries, and nobody bothers about ‘communism’ as a political creed. They regard it as the only natural course of life.

I don’t know whether all the tribes of the Khevsurs live in this manner, but they all have in common their religion and their habits. Let me say a little of them and also supply the commentaries Shota made on them.

No philologist or ethnologist has been able to solve the riddle of the origin of the Khevsurs. Whence came these strange people, so different in speech and habit from all other Caucasians? Their clothes are different. Their food is different. They look more like Italians, and yet their language is completely different. Italians in the Caucasus! The idea is preposterous. Not so preposterous as the Koubachi tribe,

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who claim descent from Rome. But these Khevsurs are quite different, and that is all that can be said of them. What little proofs there are serve only to confuse, but they must be given.

For instance, why do they wear those curious crusader-looking shirts over their bodies, with a large Maltese cross cut from bright coloured rags sewn upon it—yellow or red or black? They do not wear trousers, but long stockings, like those of medieval days, and their hats are square, curiously like those worn by Oxford dons, or more appropriately by people of the fifteenth century.

And what is the meaning of this Maltese cross, which they wear on all occasions and mark on every conceivable object? Their shields are covered with them, and the helmets they wear, plumed and waving, are embossed with this Maltese cross. Shirts of mail and breastplates and large heavy swords are all a part of their equipment. They fought the Saracens and the Persians and the Russians with these old weapons, which still bear inscriptions such as, 'Genus Vivat Stephan', or A.M.D. ('Ave Maris Dei'). Were not these the slogans and battle-cries of the crusaders? Are these not their swords? Was not Stephen one of the first kings of Jerusalem under Christian occupation?

'Who can tell', said Shota, 'the origin of these people? Perhaps they were driven from God's land and came here and found this valley by accident and lived and intermarried among the tribes they found in the hills? They may be ancient knights seeking refuge from persecution, otherwise I cannot explain that cross of Malta.'

'But what of their religion? Surely that will help to solve some of the mystery?' I said.

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'It only helps to confuse it. I have been among these people and I know. They are Christians.'

'Ah, that's helpful. Then perhaps they are descendants of the crusaders?'

'But they are only limited Christians.'

'What do you mean, "limited"?' .

'They follow the Christian doctrine, but worship Saint George and the Blessed Virgin. They know absolutely nothing of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

'Is that possible!' I exclaimed.

'Everything is possible in the Caucasus. All sorts of religious mistakes, false creeds, apostasies breed here, but these Khevsurs are very sincere. Saint George, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles Peter and Paul, are their gods. They make the sign of the cross on their foreheads whenever they slaughter a sheep, but that's all they know of Christianity.'

He explained this to me because I had observed this custom once or twice and was puzzled by it. What I also found completely bewildering in our two weeks' stay with the Khevsurs was the frequency of their Sundays.

'Every other day seems to be a Sunday in this place,' I complained to Shota. 'Is it because they like holidays or because they are religious.'

'Both reasons and neither,' replied Shota, who always seemed to speak so paradoxically about these people. 'You see there is very little work to be done. The earth is rich and no-one steals their sheep. They are also religious. They celebrate on Monday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, but I've never been able to discover the reasons for this. Let us ask a Khevsur and see what he says.'

Shota put the question to one of these Maltese-wearing



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crusader-like individuals and the man answered him. As he did not speak Russian or Azerbaijani, the language of the mountains, I asked Shota what he said. Shota was breaking up with laughter as soon as we had left the man. He was careful, however, to get out of ear-shot, for I suppose the Khevsurs, like all Caucasian peoples are very proud, and hate being laughed at.

‘This is what he said. “We keep Sunday because our neighbours, the Georgians, are Christians, but we also observe Saturday because there are some mountain Jews near us, and Friday because the Mohammedans celebrate on that day.” “But why do you also celebrate on Monday?” I said. “Because we Khevsurs are a free people and we can do just as we like!”’

It was difficult to decide whether these people were pious Christians or not. They rested on Sundays, but also on the three other days mentioned. They did not eat pork. They were polygamists. They had even a stranger custom just to be different from everyone else: they are said never to pass a night in the same room with their wives. They move from room to room.

‘And they sleep with their wives very rarely,’ said Shota, ‘once or twice a year sometimes, and if a woman becomes pregnant in the first few years they consider it very shameful and divorce her!’

And apart from their profession of Christianity (of which they were very proud—being ‘like the Georgians’), they had their own special religion!

It was in the manifestation of this religion that the Khevsurs were most interesting. They seemed to summon all the ancient gods and goddesses of Babylon and Nineveh, the

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buried, forgotten gods of Asia Minor and Ur, mixing their religious practices and gods to an unbelievable degree. Here was a temple to Zeus, another to Astarte, another to Saint George, whom they called 'Oh God, thou Holy George'. And during the Khatoba, the feast of Saint George, all their other practices, pagan, Greek, Trojan, and Cretan, were shown.

Little gods and big gods. Armazi and the great Mother Goddess, Teshub, sometimes called by a more beautiful name, Aunina or Danana. She was the same the world over—the lovely Aphrodite masquerading under many names.

But these Khevsurs are original to an astonishing degree. We had only to go as far as the first village to find a temple, or at least that is what Shota said it was. It was a large square building, with a palisade of wood and stone. The roofs were tiled with green tiles, and beneath these tiles, hung in the open, were great bells.

'The Khevsurs are great lovers of bells. They have a legend that is somewhat similar to the Roman one about geese saving the Capitol. They say that once upon a time, when this forgotten valley was about to be invaded because the secret of the pass was revealed, the bells of one of these temples began to ring furiously. No human hand, it is alleged, came near them. They just rang because the gods that watch over the destiny of these strange people did not wish them to be conquered, and sent their servants the Big Winds to toss the bells to and fro. Khevsuria was saved, and now the Khevsurs estimate the sanctity of a shrine by the number of bells it has. Some temples have as many as a thousand bells!'

I naturally expressed a wish to be allowed to go into the temple and Shota agreed.

'We might', he said, 'find one of the village policemen

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there. These policemen are also the priests, and they know everything that goes on in the village. If your sister and our kanly is here, they will reveal it to us. Although it is forbidden to kill a man in Khevsuria.'

'Excellent,' I said. 'A most enlightened people. I've often repeated that I'd be content to have my sister back without any revenge on her abductor.'

'Don't worry. If we prove our case, they will kill him themselves, but we have no right to execute any punishment on him,' Shota explained. 'These people are much too proud to allow a stranger to execute judgement in their country.'

Shota told me all this as we were entering the temple yard.

There was no-one to be seen there, so we proceeded to the entrance. The doorway was made of wood, painted in bright colours, and just as we entered the porchway we saw a huge statue.

'Surely not Christian?' I queried.

'Belial,' said Shota. 'You will often find him here. God of the Canaanites. How he got here no-one knows. But don't be surprised. The Khevsurs worship almost every kind of god to be found in the wide world. They are very cosmopolitan in their religion, and are probably frightened of offending some deity if they miss him out in their religious observances. You will find Adghilis-Deda next to the Virgin Mary and Astarte next to Saint Paul.'

We went into the body of the church. It was very dim in the porch, but when we entered, the light came down in great sheets. The roof was raised from the structure, like a barn-loft and the light streamed into the dim, windowless interior, making it look like some lost cathedral ruin. The strange effect was heightened by what appeared to be huge barrels. There were

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no altars, no statues, no idols, only the mossy floor and these huge barrels.

‘What are these for?’ I asked.

‘Beer.’

‘Beer?’

‘Holy Beer. This beer is drunk on festivals after appropriate ceremonies are carried out. Libations are poured out of the four corners of the temple and then the head priest sips this beer until he is dead drunk. The congregation follow, and the more pious you are, the quicker you get drunk.’

We were crossing to the farthest corner when a man came out of the shadows, from behind one of those huge beer barrels. He was very ugly, with a gargoyle face, and wore a curious collection of garments. He looked more like a prophet of Israel than anything else, and his voice was as loud as a trumpet.

I followed Shota’s example and paused in my tracks, reverently holding my head down.

Shota spoke to him in Azerbaijani and the man replied.

‘Allah be with you strangers. Mohammed is a great prophet. The Blessed Virgin and the Holy George protect you. I am a priest of the Temple. Bow down and drink of our liquor, for the gods we honour in so doing will be merciful unto you, and save you from lies, pestilence, and an early death.’

Before we knew what had happened two horns, brimming with muddy-looking liquid, were thrust into our hands and we had nothing else to do but gulp the holy beer down. The taste? I could never have imagined anything so horrible.

‘Mohammed is truly great,’ answered Shota, ‘and so are the gods of the Khevsurs, the Holy Virgin and Holy George.

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Tell us, reverence, whether any man has passed through the village carrying a beautiful maiden? We seek him.

‘No man with a maiden has come this way,’ said the priest. ‘But soldiers calling themselves Red and White have come. Are ye of another colour?’

‘We are of no colour, holy man,’ Shota answered. It dawned on me that the priest was referring to the political refugees who had fled to Khevsuria for safety, Tsarists and Bolsheviks.

‘Then you do not come from the police at Tiflis? It is good. We permit no police here, nor will we suffer any war. The men of the different colour have built themselves separate villages and keep peace. Do ye likewise.’

Shota said that we would be most observant, and thanking the priest, he asked him whether we might be able to put up in the village.

‘It is allowed,’ said the priest. ‘Go first to the head man and ask for shelter, but bring your own food.’

Although I did not understand this last injunction, it appears that in Khevsuria there are certain foods that are not allowed to good Khevsurs. They must not even look upon them, let alone eat them. The gods which for some reason inhabit certain articles of food and clothing must be respected.

‘Hence the rivers of this region are full of fat fish,’ said Shota to me. ‘A Khevsur would not eat a fish any more than you or I would chew a mermaid or a nymph. He will not touch grapes, for instance, because grapes are the preserves of Pan and the bacchantes, and they call grapes the “nipples of Pan”. So you see what happens to a people who have so many gods, so many different religions?’

The eating of birds, of fowl that is, is also strictly forbidden.

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A man might be eating Mercury or Phoebus without knowing it! And to eat a god means severe indigestion, perhaps even death!

What was more astonishing was that during our stay in Khevsuria and our conversation with the genuine habitant, we found them one and all professing Christianity! They would refute any idea of paganism, saying that they were the first Christians and that the particular apostle who was sent to convert them to this religion did not forbid the worship of other gods. He merely said that God was the great God, and that the Holy Virgin was to be respected. Somehow or another, they muddled God with Saint George, the special saint of the crusaders. But when evangelists of different denominations came to convert them from this curious religion of theirs, they laughed at the industrious missionaries.

‘What can you give us, Khevsurs, which we haven’t got? We have holy liquor and Saint George and all the saints, what do we want with Jesus Christ? Who is he? And how could the Holy Virgin have a son?’

Inordinately proud these Khevsurs are. We were about to speak with one of them, to all appearances a lowly shepherd, and before we could ask him the way to the next village he informed us in no uncertain terms who he was. He gave his tribal name much in the same way as Augustus might have announced himself, and then his own, and paused. He paused long enough for us to recover ourselves from the great honour that had been bestowed on us in meeting such a distinguished man.

‘Strangers,’ he said, after we had given him our names, ‘lowly of name and family, but good. The next city is a mile and a half along this highway. As you are weary you need

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not do the obeisance which is prescribed to a prince of Khevsuria.'

We looked grateful for his excellent generosity and made our way to the next 'city'—a collection of huts, looking like a fortress, high on a mountain ledge. But before we reached this village we came across a large, deserted-looking building.

'What's that?' I asked Shota, whom I was now taking to be omniscient in the strange ways of the peoples of the mountains.

'They call it a samrevlo,' Shota said absentmindedly.

'And what's a samrevlo?'

'A stable.'

'But I can't see any horses.'

'It isn't meant for horses.'

'What is it meant for then?'

Shota paused, and I felt that he was a little embarrassed.

'Oh, that,' I said.

'No. It's a sort of Khevsurian clinic——'

'A clinic!'

The place looked like a desolate barn that had not been used for many years. Straw stuck out of the building and the paths were overgrown. The roof was very low, and the eaves almost touched the ground.

'Not very hygienic, is it?'

'No. But people with a mixed religion, as I've told you before, continue all the practices common to the ancients. You do not know, probably, that savage peoples have a fear of blood, especially women's blood. They think that they are weakened by it if it touches them, their houses, or clothes. Even if a woman scratches her finger, they run miles from her.'

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'But surely this isn't a place for women with scratched fingers?'

'No. They give birth to children here. Birth is also something that is feared. Nobody, man or woman, is allowed to approach the unhappy woman who gives birth to a child; only very small girls who haven't yet reached puberty, or old crones, are allowed near to bring food and consolation.'

'But who is the man we've just seen enter the building?' I asked. We had seen a fellow with a large, primitive-looking gun going into the building, which was strange, considering Shota's statement.

'Oh, he's a murderer.'

'Good Lord! He's not going to kill the woman, is he?'

'Oh, no. He won't go near the woman. But as he's a murderer he can enter and fire the gun, and the vile spirits that the Khevsurs think are anxious to enter the bodies of the mother and the child get scared by a murderer and his gun. That's all.'

As we walked past the building we found some women on the other side, apparently at their ablutions. As soon as they saw us they ran into the building, and only their noses showed round the door-posts, watching for us to turn our backs. This we did like the gentlemen we were.

'Shy?'

'So would you be shy', said Shota, 'if you had to wash yourselves in cow's urine for a whole month before you could go back to your village. That's a very strict custom, and if a woman fails to do it she is exiled for ever. Even women who aren't Khevsurs but who have babies in the village must obey this custom.'

'I'm surprised,' I said. 'You know, the general impression



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I got from the last village we were staying at was that they treated their womenfolk with great respect.'

'They do. Except for a few of these customs and the sam-revlo, the women are by no means serfs to their menfolk. They have many privileges denied to men. They have the power to put a stop to a fight, by throwing a handkerchief between the combatants, and they then tear the handkerchief in two and wear it on their shirts to show what heroes they are and that it was only a woman's intervention that prevented them from killing their enemy! Their duelling methods are similar to those of the Georgians, who once we leave this valley, you will undoubtedly see with one knee on the ground hitting each other over the head with large broad-swords. But women. Another privilege given to them is that they can divorce a man merely by saying the words, "I divorce you."'

'Curious. Somewhat resembling the Mohammedan's way of divorcing a woman,' I remarked.

'Yes, but the process is reversed.'

Another curious thing about the Khevsurs is their marriage. The wife does not call her husband by any endearing terms. She doesn't say 'hubby-bubby' or 'sweetest honey' or anything as stupid as that. Her husband's name to her is either Pig or Ox or Cock, nothing as endearing as 'dove' or 'pigeon', and should she find him out in a lie she has the right to demand three cows or seven sheep. By this means a fairly stable household is kept!

## Chapter 6

# MASTER OF FRAGRANCE



We left Khevsuria after a stay of some ten days. By the same rope, we swung ourselves back to the world outside, but with us came many 'guests of the rope', as they were called. Apparently they hoped that things had blown over during their absence. But the most remarkable thing I noticed was the way the respective parties, White and Red, behaved. In Khevsuria itself they were on their word not to fight, they even helped each other in many small ways. I saw a burly Russian peasant, clearly a Red, being assisted up the rope that swung him into Georgia proper by a slim young lieutenant, but once they had set foot in the Georgian hills, away from the hospitality of the Khevsurs, they opened fire on each other and fled in different directions. It seems that men can forget their personal quarrels once the cause of them is removed—and the cause was the real world in which they lived, with all its conflicting loyalties, family traditions, and different ways of living.

'They fight and die in no common feud such as the mountains have beheld for centuries past,' said Shota. 'It is not the rivalry over a valley or fine pasture, nor over the death of a

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relative. It is a feud for a different sort of life—a continuance of the old one or the uprising of the new. Let us leave them, with the sure knowledge that what men cannot understand the mountains will; what man cannot forgive, eternity shall.'

Travelling without horses was, I admit, very difficult and secretly I cursed Sumi, the Persian, for being such a coward, although quite honestly I did not blame the poor man absconding as he did. To have stayed ten days alone in the mountains, without moving, without any adequate shelter and source of food, would have been folly. It was merely his Persian boastfulness that made him promise to wait for us.

'We'll find him in Tiflis, never fear,' said Shota, 'with a whole mouthful of excuses and many oaths on Allah's beard.'

But we did not have any mind for Sumi and our horses. We were on the outskirts of Georgia, still in the land of the Chechens, and when we came across an old man sitting in a green turban, as thick as a python and twisted round his head to an enormous size, we knew that Christian Georgia was still far away.

This old man caught my fancy, and when Shota suggested that we should walk over to where he was standing and ask him the question (which must by now have become familiar to the reader) I was overjoyed.

He stood in front of a cave hung with a curtain of beads and strings of felt to keep out the wind, and in his hand he held a large opaque flask full of a pale pink liquid, which he frequently put to his nose and sniffed. He was a small man, with intensely grey-green eyes, and he wore a long cloak of purple and silver, embroidered with pomegranate blossoms, and on his feet were expensive-looking slippers, covered with

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seed pearls. He was an altogether strange sight in his green turban, holding the flask to his nose, but I had been warned against vulgar curiosity and approached humbly behind Shota.

'Master,' said Shota, with obvious reference to his green turban, sign of extreme holiness and pilgrimage to Mecca, 'we are strangers on our way to Tiflis. We look for a man and a maid. Hast thou seen them?'

The man did not answer at first but continued his sniffing. Now and again he went, 'Num, num, num,' and then 'Pahe, pahe, pahe.'

From the 'num, num, num' he might well have been of any nationality, but the 'pahe, pahe, pahe' definitely indicated that he was Persian, or at least he must have lived in Persia to make a noise like that. It means, literally, 'wonderful' or 'perfect'.

Well, we listened to his noises without interrupting him, and when finally he was satisfied with the smell in the bottle, he turned to us, and said, 'Ye ask me have I seen a man and a maid? I have seen many. They come here from farthest Laziristan to see me. What is it to you that I have seen a man and a maid?'

Shota explained in greater detail and the old man listened politely, going now and again into his cave to fetch out more coloured bottles, and ranging them before him. The first was pink, as I have said, and the others were blue and red and ochre. The bottle with the blue was the most beautiful, an intense copper-sulphate blue, and this he poured into the pink and made a colour like strawberry ice cream.

'No,' he said, 'I have not seen those you describe so eloquently, my son. If they are not married they would have nothing to do with me.'

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I must confess that I was growing more and more intrigued. Why wouldn't they come to him if they were not married? And what were all those coloured carafes of bright colours that he sniffed?

'I am a lonely man,' he said, 'except in the spring time, and then they come to me, with their fair women and their books. . . .'

Books and fair women, how did they go together and why should they come to an old man who lived in an inaccessible part of the mountains, who sniffed at bottles and wore a bright green turban.

'And I pronounced on them.'

He pronounced on them? What did that mean? Was he a doctor?

'Art thou a master of herbs and amputations?' asked Shota, who was thinking my thoughts.

'Yea,' said the old man, still pottering with his coloured flasks, adding colours and subtracting and sniffing at them. 'Of herbs I am a master, but not of amputations. That is the work of slaves. I am a Master of Fragrance, the creator of sweet smells, the beautifier of God, the darling of women and fair youths, and the impregnator of books.'

And that is exactly what he was. A Master of Fragrance. A perfumer. A Molyneux or Chanel of the mountains. A creator of sweet smells.

He thrust a large bottle of pale pink contents to me and said, 'Thou hast a young nose, smell and tell me what thou smelllest.'

I did as he commanded me.

'I smell a rose,' I said definitely, after I had inhaled the perfume.

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'Yet better than the rose,' said the Master of Fragrance with all the pride of a craftsman, 'for a rose dieth away but my scents live on.'

'Oh, Master, favourite of Allah,' Shota exclaimed hurriedly, 'forgive me for not recognizing thy honourable art. But thou art one of a dwindling race.'

Shota, of course, knew what would please the old man. To be told that you are of a dwindling race is a great compliment. It proclaims your uniqueness as nothing else can.

'Indeed,' said the old gentleman with evident satisfaction as he rubbed his two palms together, 'I am of the few, but the modern world has little room for craftsmen, and I who have made mankind smell beautifully for so many years might have died of starvation for all they cared, but here in the mountains the folk are kind. In the cities they have forgotten my art.'

It appeared that this old man, whose name was Aziz el Dami, had served the royal masters of Istanbul and Teheran, but the war and the Young Turk revolution had driven the Black Spider of the Ildis-Kiosk, Abdul-Hamid the Damned, from his throne, and with him his thousand concubines, his eunuchs, Nubians, masters of fragrance, of soaps, of linens, and silks, and his fair boys, and Aziz was out of employment. 'I had been in the Caucasus hills', he said 'in the days of my youth, and had learnt the perfumer's art, and now I have returned to give these people pleasure, not for money and great riches, but for a little food. Come with me into my cell.'

Shota and I readily agreed to the old man's suggestion. I am sure that Shota was as curious as I to know what went on behind the heavy beaded curtains, and when we entered we were not disappointed in the magnitude of our surprise. For, lo! the place was lighted with many silver lamps such as

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Aladdin might have rubbed, and they all burned gently, situated in the crevices of the cave, so that they looked like tired wise little eyes; on the floor there was a profusion of silk carpets and cushions, while ranged at the back stood a row of about a hundred bottles full of different scents and colours, with curious inscriptions on them, written in the secret language of the master perfumers, unknown to the rest of the world.

‘It is a miracle’, said Shota, ‘that thou should live so in the mountain, having no fear for any man. Thy wealth is exceeding, O master, and thy fame.’ And with those words Shota bowed. I bowed also.

The old man smiled as if in polite acknowledgement of our surprise.

‘I was a great Master of Fragrance,’ he said simply, ‘and the Sultan, evil man though he was, was fond of scents and beautiful women. He said to me, “Aziz el Dami, what is a rose without its scent? What is a woman without her perfume? On the bed of love many fair ones may be laid out, but they must have the scents of heaven. Be thou the Master of Smells and I will give thee thy weight in silver and gold.” And so I served the Sultan and his harem for many years, until he grew old and suspicious and actually accused me of devising a scent that would poison him with its fumes. I fled the palace, but when he discovered his mistake he called me back. “Aziz el Dami, I forgive thee, even though thou would be happy to see me dead, but without thy scents in my nostrils, life is wearisome.” And after that, I returned to his employ.’

He went over to his long range of bottles and neatly picked up a few between his fingers.

‘They tell me that down in the cities there are makers of

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perfume, but that they make few kinds of perfume and that many women go about their world smelling alike. Is that so?’

‘It is so, wise one. They are barbarians,’ Shota said.

‘Well spoken, my son. They are barbarians. How can it be? Where are their souls that they can make many women smell alike? Is there one woman in the world like another? And yet they bathe their many thousands in one perfume as if they were horses or dogs, made to smell one way and no other. It is a sin.’

‘It is the way of the cities. They have no craft and no patience,’ Shota said, playing his cues with pretty elegance.

‘Said nobly, my son. Thy heart and thy head are good to flatter an old man.’

It was odd to see Shota being called ‘my son’ by a man who must have been barely ten years his senior, but as a Master of Fragrance he borrowed his age from the antiquity of his art, which was indeed very old.

‘And yet we, Masters of Fragrance, the few of us that there were even in the old world, moved among the most respected of princes, as their peers. Why in the court of the Sun, the Flower Palace of the Shah of Persia, it was I and I alone who saw the future brides of the King of Kings. They might come from the Pamirs, daughters of Indian chiefs, or coal-black sisters of the Ethiopian Majesty, or they might be Circassians, with purple-deep eyes, fat or thin, tall or short, they were carried like precious merchandise to the court of the Shah on the backs of tapestried camels, and it was not the Master of the Universe who first beheld them in their beauty, it was I, Master of Fragrance. How the dressmakers and hairdressers and other flunkies were jealous. Why even the Shah was jealous, trying to peep through the curtains of my room, at



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the Pearl that was to join his harem. But I forbade it.'

'But what did you do with the girl, Master?' asked Shota.

'I spoke with her. I put her at ease and told her how great was the honour done to her to come to the Flower Palace of Persia and that perhaps her son might be the Shah one day and she the most honoured of all women in the land. And then I watched her reactions. I listened to her tales, to her trivial stories, her griefs, yea even her secret loves, and how once she loved a merchant of copper pails who had come to her father's palace in the distant Pamir hills. She would tell me all. The names of her father and her mother, her brothers' and sisters' names, and the names of her favourite dogs and falcons and toys, for some of these maidens were barely children. And I would listen long.'

'And having listened, O Master, what would thy thoughts be?' Shota inquired.

'I would have no thoughts—yet. I would be composing a perfume that would describe all that she had told me, all the small nostalgias, and memories of her home that would soothe her. I would think of the wind, the champak wind that blows up there, and try to catch its sour dry smell for her.'

'Wonderful, wonderful is thy art, beloved of Allah,' Shota exclaimed, knowing better than I that the only way we could keep the old man talking would be by flattering him. As it was he was getting very fidgety and was feeling the sound bellies of his flasks with great affection, suggesting that in a moment he would bid us adieu and would continue with his mixing.

'And then', he said, 'I would make her dance. I would make her dance to her native music, to rolling drums that would move her body into strange attitudes, making her betray her smallest emotions, for we masters of fragrance

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know that it is the small emotions, the petty things in one's blood, that build up the total character, not the big things necessarily.'

He was growing more and more enthusiastic, and suddenly he sat down on a pile of silk cushions and bade us do the same. He then offered us ripe figs and pomegranates, and resumed his tale.

'But not only did she dance before me, she ate before me. That too is very important. It reveals the natural grace and poise of a person. It betrays the mind at ease or the worried mind. It shows a glutton or a fastidious person. I would feed her on all manner of strange foods, sweet and sour, with rices and lentils, and different spiced meats, and I would watch how her stomach could take them and at what she turned her pretty nose up and what she accepted. By these means I composed my perfumes.'

He peeled a fig for me with long delicate fingers and handed it to me, as a sign of special favour. 'Thou silent one, take this fig and may thy wisdom be as great as the number of pips in this fig!'

Shota laughed heartily at this exhibition of ancient wit, and I followed suit. This put the old man into further good humour.

'But not only did she dance and eat. I would make her stand still balanced on one foot, then on another. I looked at her from every side. I stayed with her long hours and told her tales, and it was only then that I left the girl and retired to my innerchamber, there to deliberate and to compose my perfume.'

'And was it not difficult to think of an original perfume for every girl who entered the Shah's harem?' asked Shota incredulously.

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'It was difficult. It was most difficult and lengthy too.'

'And how many moons would have to brighten the sky before thou didst finish thy composition, Master?'

'Sometimes one moon, sometimes even two. But in the first few weeks I had prepared at least a few drops of the essence—the base as it were of the scent I would bestow on the maiden as her own perfume for ever. I sometimes composed in my dreams, in my very sleep, and then getting up in the night I would light the tapers and begin to work. For consider the difficulties. What if the maid had some small physical blemish. Such as——' He hesitated, as if to imply that an artist like himself found it difficult to utter any kind of inelegance.

'A wart on her nose,' suggested Shota bravely, 'or an ugly toe.'

'Indeed, any of these,' said Aziz el Dami, coldly, 'or perhaps a harsh voice, sounding like a camel. She might be some rough wench of the mountains, whose beauty had captured the attention of the slave-hunter and he had brought her to the Shah or the Sultan for a present. Well, then it was a problem. I would have to concoct something as wild and untutored as the girl to make her attractive. A strong musk scent, like an animal's, but with a breath of spring flowers such as may be picked only in the hills. Or I would emulate the scent of drying grass where horses have been lying, or perhaps the perfume of burning straw, or one hundred other smells that may be had in the mountains, and give it to the girl.'

'But what if thou didst have a princess, O Master?' Shota inquired.

'Then I would choose some soft scent, some breath of jasmine, that would serve her as a dream salve, or some perfume that smelt of flowers and yet was without them—some scent

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made up on inspiration from her smile, crystal as a pure stream, like a scent of sunshine on peach blossom—or the flight of small birds' wings, of flashing myriad colours. This scent would give every impression of her body, of her movements and her thoughts. That is what I would give to a princess. Or even——'

And here he paused again, and allowed his hands to creep over to a large bottle filled with colourless liquid; when he took out the stopper the room filled with a strong and heady scent as of poppies and honey.

'Or even this. I would give a strong, totally contrasting perfume to a shywench. I would bring the breath of passion on to her chaste face and her small white breasts. I would pervert her with the perfume, pervert not her mind or her body, but the atmosphere around her, so that when the Sultan her husband would lie near her, he would smile at the perfumer's joke and say, "Aziz, my Aziz, thou art a rascal to give a wench with such a pale skin and such innocent eyes the scent of a harlot's body. But I love thee and will reward thee well for my laughter." And if she was a shrew I would sometimes give her the scent of a cornflower or of newly baked bread, and it would calm her like a medicine, for think not that I was only a Master of Fragrance, I was also a doctor whose cures went through the nose right to the soul and there created such sweet harmonies that shrews and vixens and gossips and liars were amended, and the Sultan, my master, would again be well pleased and say, "Aziz el Dami is a great doctor. This woman here with an ever-moving tongue is now as still and silent as a mosquito without wings. I shall reward thee, O Aziz, for thou hast preserved me from sin. I was going to kill this woman and feed her tongue to the lions." But

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think not that Aziz was only a perfumer of women. He was also a perfumer of men.'

With such pride did the old man announce these tidings, that Shota could not restrain a shudder.

'Of men?' he asked incredulously. 'But men only use nards and such-like.'

'Oh, no,' said Aziz el Dami, 'I mean not nards and sweet-smelling stuff for men. That I leave for the dressmakers and other knaves. But I have made scents of war, a weapon as efficacious as a sword, and I have often been honoured for this. Why, to-day some men will come for my special war unguent, for which they will pay me many pieces of silver and a camel-load of goodly fruit.'

'And what is thy war unguent, O Master?'

'It is a scent for warriors. It will make him brave in the face of his enemies and will frighten them and make them run when they come up to him and smell his scent.'

'And of what is this scent made, if I do not ask a secret?'

'It is made of many ingredients of which thou knowest nothing, but I will tell thee that there is much garlic in it. The men will smear their bodies and their faces with my unguent and no enemy will dare to come near them without the risk of suffocation!'

This was certainly an original method of warfare. I had read in the papers that the Germans had used poisoned gas—and I wondered whether their Masters of Fragrance were as gentle-minded as this old man.

'But', said Aziz el Dami, 'this is but a side-line. I am no great maker of stinks—but of smells. I do it more as a favour than anything else. My province is the perfuming of women, not of men. And sometimes I devote myself to books.'

'Ah,' said Shota, 'thou art a philosopher or a writer?'

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'Nay, I am none of these. I am neither a philosopher nor a writer, but I make both the philosophers' and the writers' works live long after they are dead. I am a perfumer of books in the moments when I have no women to perfume, and here in the mountains, except when the seasons are propitious, I have many books to perfume. They are as subtle, as fickle, as difficult to understand as women, sometimes.'

The novelty of this idea immediately appealed to me, and, thinking it over now, I consider that this book—far from a literary masterpiece—might have been enhanced by the subtlety of Aziz el Dami's art, if only I could find him. I wonder how he would have treated the anecdotes I relate about him? Would the perfume he would choose for this book be complimentary to me? Or would it be a rude contrast—a master perfumer's 'joke'? In his opinion the book would not have been sufficiently clever or profound to intoxicate the reader by its contents alone.

'It is no easy thing to perfume a book, my masters,' said Aziz el Dami. 'For like women, I have to study them, learn their fickleness and their wisdom, and often enough I have to meet the author and speak with him, sometimes even suggesting alterations in his book to fit my scent.'

Words of menace! How many authors would agree to alter their scrips because the Master of Fragrance had decided that some ideas or sentences were inappropriate?

'And if the book is dull and maketh a reader fall to sleep before he reacheth the end, I with my art can so regale him, that he think he reads the greatest masterpiece and absorbs the noblest thoughts,' said Aziz el Dami.

A pity, a pity that he could not perfume the whole edition of this book before it was published.

## Chapter 7

# SLAVES OF BEAUTY

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‘Moabad that day sent so many gifts that nobody can mention them one by one, many a coffer full of gold, jewels and pearls; many a garment of great price, withal numberless brocades, broidered at the edges; many a cup of crystal, trays and golden vessels, all inlaid with jewels; and scents of many kinds; and withal furs; and many slaves and handmaidens—Greeks, Chinese and Balkhians, all pretty and untamed as wild goats, and yet as fair as peacocks in womanliness and beauty.’

VISRAMIANI (*The Loves of Vis and Ramin*).

From the Georgian of the twelfth century

‘The time is not ripe for us to go into Georgia,’ said Shota on the day that we left Aziz el Dami to his sweet-smelling bottles and his composition of perfumes.

I did not query Shota’s statement. I knew that he had a good reason for saying that. The good reason itself I did not know, but when we stayed one night in Aziz el Dami’s cave some men came early in the morning when I was barely awake and had spoken with Shota. What they had said I do not know, because they spoke in Georgian and my knowledge of the language was limited to a few words I had picked up as a

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child from Shota himself. But I knew that they spoke earnestly from the tone of their voices and the recurrent argument they put up to every suggestion Shota made.

When Shota returned to the cave and woke me up, saying that we would have to start on our journey again, I was not surprised, but I pretended that I had been sleeping.

‘Do not think’, said Shota, ‘that by not going into Georgia immediately we are losing sight of your sister. In my opinion we have reached this spot ahead of her and the young man who has stolen her. And I’m not so certain that he would come to Georgia, where he knows you have many friends. I think he may have gone to Karbadia and then to Mingrelia. Let us go that way.’

So instead of going due south we went westward, crossing the river Kasani into the land of the Kartli. Here I had my first experience of the slave-trade, a trade I had imagined had been suppressed by the Tsars when they took over the Caucasus from the native kings and princes. Nothing of the sort. The trade had merely become furtive and not so widespread, but it was there.

The slave-trade is interesting historically, if for no other reason. Most of the potentates of the East, their sons and descendants, have at some time or another had a Caucasian ancestry, for the Caucasians have always been very beautiful—and poor.

In ancient Georgia, for instance, slavery was a recognized institution. A peasant could be transferred with an estate, or given away by the landowner, or sold, or he himself could sell himself into slavery. But he could also buy his freedom, or be given his freedom by his master for ever, or for the master’s duration of life. A document in the year 1689 has an interest-



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ing quotation of eight peasants 'sold for a handful of gold'.

But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Persia and Turkey came more into the orbit of Caucasian political and economic life, people were transferred wholesale from the hills to the slave markets of Tabriz, Trebizond, and Constantinople, to the enrichment of their feudal masters. And this commerce, iniquitous and unjust, which threatened to depopulate the hills, was particularly brisk in the districts of Mingrelia, Imereti, and Guria—the very places Shota and I had chosen as our destination. Kartli was on the outskirts of Imereti.

It was in the seventeenth century that the King of Kakheti, Taymurazi the First, accused his nobles of selling fifteen thousand Christian boys to the Turks, and the Gurreli of disposing of another twelve thousand.

Brosset, for instance, the greatest historiographer of the Caucasus, mentions the fact that not only were the peasants and their children sold into slavery, but in 1747 one hundred sons of the middle classes (the *tavadni* and *aznaurni*) were sent to Persia on the demand of Nadir Shah, who also asked for three hundred young widows, an equal number of boys and girls, five hundred peasants' families, and twenty thousand measures of wheat.

Sir John Chardin, who travelled in Mingrelia and Georgia during the seventeenth century, made the following observation:

'Mingrelia is at present very much displeased; there not being in it above twenty thousand inhabitants. Though it is not above thirty years ago there was no less than four-score thousand. The cause of which decrease proceeds from their Wars with their neighbour and the vast number of people of

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both sexes, which the Nobility have sold of late years. For a long time there has been drained out of Mingrelia every year, either by Purchase or Barter, above twelve thousand persons; all of which are sold to the Mahometans, Persians, and Turks, there being none but they that deal in that sort of Traffic in those parts. They carry three thousand every year directly to Constantinople, which they have in exchange for Cloth, Arms, and other things which they carry, as I have said, into Mingrelia.'

Moreover, he adds: 'I have been shew'd several Gentlemen who have been so prodigiously unnatural' as to sell their own children, wives, and mothers. He then gives an account of an impecunious but enterprising nobleman who to find the wherewithal to marry his mistress hit on the brilliant idea of selling his wife and twelve priests he had kidnapped to some Turkish sea-captain!

And so the Caucasians went as tribute to their conquerors or were the live money with which their own princes were able to barter and buy the 'amenities of civilization'. True, it may be said that these people were so poor and that they had nothing but 'live money' with which to appease the anger of the Shah and the Sultan. The mighty kings did not want cattle. They had enough of them. There was only one thing they wanted, and had not enough of, and that was beauty.

Quotations there are in plenty that praise the beauty of the Caucasian races, especially with reference to the handsomest of them all, the Circassians and the Abkhaz. Ezekiel, prophet of the Old Testament, speaks of the trade 'in the persons of men' in the cities of Syria from the lands of Tubal Cain and Meshech. Herodotus notes the tribute of boys and girls sent by the Colchians (inhabitants of Guria) to the Persians,

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and the historian Procopius makes a melancholy claim when he says that the Byzantines resorted to the Abkhazians for their most fashionable breed of eunuch, 'for each one of them (the Abkhazi) had to dread that at some time he would become the father of a comely child'.

Of course, there are reasons other than greed that prompted these forcible emigrations. They might be called economic and political reasons. The country—Caucasia—was rich enough to support a much larger population than it was ever called upon to support, but the regional organization, the tribal wars, the blood feuds, and lack of political cohesion made the life of the peasants and the poorer classes intolerable. It was perhaps better to be taken away from the hovels in which they lived and transported to the comparative comforts of Istanbul, there to become a Janissary in the service of the Sultan, wearing a fine uniform and earning a handsome pay. It was better than to remain at home and be sold every time the land exchanged hands, or to fight in some petty war between the rival chiefs. As Janissaries many of these handsome, fine-mannered, brave people found themselves in important posts at the courts of their masters; sometimes they became the masters of their masters, and even seized the thrones. The Mameluke Corps, which held Egypt in fief for Turkey, was composed exclusively of the mountaineers.

And what of the girls? Their lot was more enviable perhaps in a Turkish harem than in the mountain hovels of the very poor.

'It is a terrible thing to admit,' said Shota, 'but for nine-tenths of the Caucasians the Caucasus has never been their home. But it will be soon.'

Always 'soon'; always hope.

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It must not be supposed, however, that the Caucasus was a completely depopulated area, for in the days of Queen Tamara and on the evidence of many castles and monasteries scattered all over the hills, there must have been even more people per square mile in the Caucasus during the days of the Great Queen than in England during the corresponding period. The great cities of the eastern Caucasus were, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the richest in the world.

After forty years of war a Mongol invader, by name No'in Arghun, carried out a census in order to levy more troops and adjust his taxation. He gave the population of Georgia alone as in the region of six million people. It was only after the Black Death, the invasion of Tamerlaine, and the terrible campaigns of the Persians against the Caucasians that in 1836 a Russian census was taken. It showed the population to be 225,395!

They can still remember in the Caucasus how a messenger would come from the Sultan once a year, bringing a list of the girls he wanted and their specifications. One would have to be slim with hazel-grey eyes, another fat but with small breasts, and so forth, and then the nobility, anxious to carry out the Sultan's orders, would scour the hills and dales and find the girls and sent them away to the lascivious old Turk.

Once the princes made the mistake of sending the Shah of Persia a similar present, but the old gentleman was very annoyed.

'I don't want girls! Don't those dunderheads in the hills know that I like their *tuksusi*? I want their boys. Let them send me a hundred boys as tribute or I'll come there myself and fetch them.'

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So from that time onwards boys were sent as tribute and not girls.

Can it be wondered that under such circumstances the blood of the East was much mingled with that of the Caucasians. Sir John Chardin makes an interesting observation on this point. He says :

‘In other parts of the Kingdom the Persian blood is grown clearer by the mixture of the Georgian and Circassian Blood, which is certainly the People of the World, which Nature favours most, both on account of the Shape and Complexion, and of the Boldness and Courage ; they are likewise Sprightly, Courtly and Amorous. There is scarce a gentleman in Persia whose Mother is not a Georgian or a Circassian Woman ; to begin with the King who commonly is a Georgian or Circassian by the Mother’s side ; and whereas the Mixture began about a hundred years ago, the Female kind is grown fairer as well as the other ; and the Persian Women are now very handsome and very well shap’d, tho’ they are still inferior to the Georgians.’

Chardin was rightly shocked at this state of affairs, I mean at the disgusting trade in flesh and blood that went on in the Caucasus, although he makes no mention of an equally disgusting trade—in negroes—that the Christian peoples of Spain, France, Holland, and England were at that time engaged in. But in one case a man had the chance of becoming a Janissary—or a Prime Minister—and in the other all that awaited him was the slaver’s whip, eighteen hours of labour, and an early death.

For all its stupidity and servility to the princes the Church of Georgia protested against the sale of its Christian children to the Muslims and severe penalties were threatened, but as

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history shows us, rarely carried out, against traffickers. The laws of the Catholicos excommunicated them and ordered them to be hanged if they did not re-purchase the victim after their dark deed. There are records showing how promises were made to pious bishops by one prince or another never to sell his people into slavery.

But in Georgia itself there was another curious practice, that of substituting Ossetians and Cherkesses for the levies the shahs and the sultans demanded, and there was a tax of about two shillings levied on every peasant's hovel 'to buy Ossetians, and others', to send them to fight in the pressed service of the great kings'.

'Taxed, oppressed, harassed by wars and civil wars between petty contenders, worried by the Muslims, fooled by the priesthood, and constantly threatened with deportation and slavery, the fortunes of the Georgians, my people, were not very good, and much of that injustice has remained. We had only one friend—we, whom God abandoned, had one helper—and that was Mother Nature, for she was infinitely kind to us Georgians,' Shota said, his voice trembling with emotion, 'for our needs in a soft sweet climate were few and the means of satisfying them were not hard to find. Look—you saw how rich our soil is, and how warm our sun! We could repair our losses easily, we could grow enough to eat and enough to clothe ourselves. And near by were the mountains, our friends, forbidding and savage to the enemy who did not know them as well as we, but kindly refuges and havens for us, so that even to this day a Georgian will kiss the rocks before he ascends the mountains.'

How little did Sir John Chardin really understand the Georgians. He mentions their poverty and misery, but is

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unable to measure them against their great spiritual bravery, their love for their land, and their nature. He says (in the seventeenth century, 1686, admittedly):

‘The poor people go almost naked such is their misery not to be paralell’d as not having anything to cover their Nakedness but a pitiful sorry Felt like to the Chlamys of the Ancients; into which they thrust their Heads, and turn which way they please as the Wind fits; for it covers but one side of their bodies, and falls down no lower than their knees. . . .

‘He that has a Shirt and a pair of pitiful Drawers thinks himself Rich; for almost all of ’em go Bare-Foot, and such of the Colchians as pretend to Shoes, have nothing but a piece of Buffaloe’s Hide, and that untann’d too; which piece of raw Hide is lac’d about their Feet with a Thong of the same; so that for all these sort of Sandals, their Feet are as dirty, as if they went Bare-Foot.’

But that is not all. Sir John Chardin’s good taste is further outraged.

‘Another most inhuman Tenet of theirs, that it is a piece of Charity to Murder Infants newly born, when they have not sufficient wherewith to maintain ’em; or such as are sick and are past hope of recovery. And the reason they give is this, that by so doing, they put those Children out of a great deal of Misery, which they would have undergone in a languishing Distemper, which in the end must of necessity carry ’em off. Such are the Arguments of these Barbarous People that have neither shame nor Humanity.’

The ‘shame and Humanity’ that Sir John Chardin must have felt at these sights did not explode itself on those perpetrators of unhappiness, the bad political and economic sys-

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tems, that left the people at the mercy of civil wars and depredations and slavery.

‘Let us’, said Shota, ‘turn to the lighter side of this problem, for by looking on the light we shall better be able to judge the darkness. Believe me when I tell you that we trembled in our shoes whenever the princes sent their Nurki, as their equestrian retainers were called, into our village to seize the live tribute for the Persians and the Turks. Thank God, my mother said, I was born with a large crooked nose! But let me tell you a story that is true; it comes from Mingrelia.’

We had settled down for a luncheon of roast lamb and rice, and I was in a mood to listen attentively.

‘They say that the last ruling Prince of Mingrelia—I forget his name—made as much as a million pounds in selling his beautiful subjects before he realized the danger he was in of depopulating the whole countryside. So what did he do?’

‘He went and sold other people’s children, in the neighbouring countries?’ I ventured, joining in the fun of guessing and so making a story more agreeable.

‘Not at all. This very clever and commercially minded ruler decided to run a breeding establishment for the purpose of producing beautiful girls.’

‘Good heavens! He didn’t propose running a stud, the same way as thoroughbreds are reared?’

‘Exactly. Why not? The idea was the same. He got hold of beautiful young women and handsome young men and persuaded them to live together for a length of time, and babies came. Then the fathers and mothers were given a sum of money and returned home, while the prince looked after the babies in a very elaborate, clean, well-serviced crèche!



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Foreigners who visited this establishment actually went home saying how enlightened this ruler was and what an example he was to the Western world! His example was soon followed by other princes, who saw a fortune in this human farming, and it was whispered about that not a few of the princes themselves grew very proletarian-minded and served as humble workmen in this factory. In the end the Russian governors heard about this original plan, and instead of reporting them to the Tsar, who was rather indulgent to his new vassals, they deposed them for "misrule", gave them countless orders and large pensions, and packed them off to the court at Saint Petersburg, where they became fashionable curios for a little time and amused the ladies with their improbable tales. If questioned discreetly on the subject of the slave trade they answered, "Honoured Ones, is it our fault that our sons and daughters are among the most beautiful on this earth, and that, being poor and having no other things to barter for our necessities of life, we sell them to the highest bidder? We try to see that they go to good homes, don't we?"

'Exactly as if they were disposing of cats and dogs?'

'Precisely, and this trade has gone on right up to this day. Soon we shall change it all.'

Soon . . . again that 'soon'.

'The Russians, I must admit, with their Christian consciences, or rather their desire to conciliate the West and show themselves progressive, did all they could to suppress slavery. They sent commissions. They caught the traffickers and beat them and sent them to Siberia—but they couldn't stamp out the plague. Where there is demand, there is supply. Prices were high, but the slaves nevertheless found their way to their buyers. The poverty of many tribes, which had relied

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on the slave traffic to keep them from starving, also helped the slavers. They resented Russian interference with what they regarded as their legitimate business, and slave traffic was organized underground; but in the end the Russians decided to use every means in their power to ruin the slave-traders. They decided to use the Tsar—as the symbol of liberation. He had after all liberated the Russian serfs, and now he was going to do another act of the same nature and proclaim the freedom of all enslaved peoples in the Caucasus. They thought that would make him popular with the slaves. So His Excellency the Viceroy of the Caucasus summoned the princes and told them that the Most Holy Tsar of all the Russias (and that included the Caucasus) personally asked them to do him the favour of abstaining from slavery. What do you think the princes said?’

‘They were indignant and made excuses like the owners of black slaves in America?’ I suggested.

‘Not at all. They all agreed to the Tsar’s request as one man. Solemnly they put their hands on their breasts and swore that from henceforth slavery would be abolished in the hills. They would put up a memorial at their own expense on the highest mountain in the Caucasus to commemorate the Tsar’s goodness and wisdom, but they humbly asked the Viceroy to make it a law that all slaves, and that included their own house slaves, should be given their liberty at once.’

‘Very exaggerated and colourful, like everything else Caucasian,’ I remarked, ‘but at least it showed their good intentions.’

‘Do you think so? There was nothing of good intention in their request. It was cunning, pure cunning, that was all.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘This. A few days after the law had been passed, a humble

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deputation of slaves asked for audience of the Viceroy. He, good man, was rather pleased. He imagined that they had come to thank the Tsar of All the Russias for their liberty, and he arranged to have a number of newspaper men sent down from Saint Petersburg for this auspicious occasion, on which the world was to learn the enlightenment of the Tsar.'

'But it was enlightened of him all the same, wasn't it?' I challenged.

'That's not what the deputation said. Quite the contrary. They were in a terrible state. They begged the Viceroy, as the representative of the almighty Tsar, to convey to him their complete distress at the decree which gave them their liberty.'

'Oh,' I protested, 'that's a tall story. Why should these people protest at liberty?'

'If you don't interrupt so much I'll tell you. The Viceroy was as surprised as you are. He thought that these slaves would appear to him in chains, and would be haggard and worn and hungry. Still, he had got over that surprise, but when they asked him to rescind the decree of liberation he was very puzzled. "Heavens," he cried, "what's the matter with you Caucasians? You boast that you love liberty, and now when it is given to you, you wish to become slaves again." "Slavery", answered the liberated slaves surlily, "is our sacred right. It is our privilege." "How a privilege? What do you mean, a privilege?" the astonished Viceroy managed to blurt out. "Are you mad?" "Excellency," said the slaves proudly, "we are in full possession of our senses. Understand this, many of us here, household slaves though we are, belong to the ancient nobility, and there are even a few of us who are priests. Did not the Tsar say that he would respect our traditions and our religious beliefs?"'

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Shota said all this with a perfectly straight face. I simply couldn't believe him.

'But I swear to you, Georgi, that it's true,' he protested.

'All right,' I said, 'I'll agree to believe you, if you tell me what the Viceroy said to these "noble slaves".'

'He didn't say anything. He was too flabbergasted; and when they left him he treated the whole matter as a huge practical joke. The Caucasians, as you know, are great practical jokers, and this same Viceroy had tasted their humour more than once, but he decided to make sure. It was just an idea of his, but he called the slave-owners, the other princes and merchants and rich peasants, and asked them in a round-about manner whether any of their slaves belonged to the ancient nobility, and were some of them even priests. He said this more in the way of a joke, so that if they laughed he could laugh with them. But no. They wore solemn faces and said that it was true. Some of their slaves were indeed princes and not a few of them were priests. The unhappy Viceroy looked at the assembled grandees and couldn't make them out, but seeing that they were sincere he said, "Well, my friends, I believe you. You surely wouldn't be so ill-advised as to play a joke on the Tsar's representative, would you?" The grandees shook their heads. "Alas," they said, "we wish it was a joke, but the facts are as we have stated." "Then," said the Viceroy, whose zeal in the Tsar's service was not diminished by all these accounts, "isn't there more reason for you to free these people who you say are princes and priests? Don't they deserve their liberty?"'

Shota paused here to regain his breath, but his eyes were twinkling merrily, especially when he saw that I was no longer disbelieving the story.

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‘What do you think the slaves said? They had been summoned as well as their owners and they had turned up in resplendent uniforms. They protested, but their owners bowed themselves to the ground and said how wise the Tsar was, and what a fine thing it was to liberate their household slaves, and that from that moment they would look upon their slaves as equals and friends. But the slaves protested. With great dignity. They said that they would absolutely refuse to submit to this human decree. They would go on being slaves to their dying day. The Viceroy did not know what to make of all this, so he appointed a commission to study the whole problem.’

‘And I suppose the commission found that the slaves had been threatened by their owners or bribed into protesting, eh?’

‘Ha, ha,’ roared Shota, ‘exactly what everyone thought from the Viceroy downwards, but do you know what the commission found out? It found that the household slaves belonged to some of the oldest and most noble of all the families in Caucasia. Many centuries ago a poor relative of theirs had sold his freedom to some prince, and as a result the rights and duties of all his descendants were for ever prescribed. It appeared that the slaves were only obliged to do the work their ancestor had done. If he had been an armour-bearer, they were to be armour-bearers, although by now the princes no longer needed armour. Moreover, they were looked after by their masters for their natural lives, and their needs attended to. They prospered, while their masters grew poorer and poorer. The slaves increased and multiplied in alarming numbers, and the wretched owner found that he had to use most of his income to support these parasites. A man whose ancestor had been a groom of the bedchamber could

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do the work of such a fellow and no more. The work was usually very light and honourable, but when he had children, his children likewise became grooms of the bedchamber, until there were more grooms than there were bedchambers, although that did not seem to matter. Or if a man had sold himself into slavery as a cook, all his children born in slavery became cooks, and all their children, and their children, so it wasn't surprising that a man with only a small family to feed had something like ten cooks, who refused to do any other work than cooking.'

'An amazing situation! Wasn't there a way by which the owners could give them their freedom and so get rid of them?'

'Apparently not. These slaves and their descendants had documents proving their positions in life, and they resented liberation. They refused it and a man could not turn his slave out if he was so loyal as to refuse liberation.'

'So that explains why the owners were so glad when the Tsar issued his proclamation?'

'Of course. They were overjoyed. At last they would have something for themselves.'

'Well and how did the Viceroy solve this problem?'

'Very simply. He insisted that the slaves should be released, but he offered the slaves a large enough income for one year on which they could live and look around for some other job. It was very hard for them to accustom themselves to real work and there was much grumbling, but in the end the slaves were free and the Tsar was considered a great benefactor.'

I might mention that the abolition of slavery applied only to the Christian parts of the Caucasus; the serf—or peasant—was liberated much later.

'Don't be surprised,' said Shota; 'life in the Caucasus is

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full of amusing paradoxes, as the Russians found out when they finally conquered the Caucasus.'

'When was that?' I asked.

'If you ask the Russians, they will say 1874, but that's not true. No-one has ever been able to conquer the Caucasus and I don't think they ever will. The Caucasians are a people who can be led, but not driven. One day they will have their own leaders, their own language, and will be able to live in peace and friendship with their bigger neighbours. The Russians were the last and final "conquerors" of the Caucasus. They came with their huge armies, but got no farther than the large towns. These they garrisoned, but could do little to subdue the country and the mountains. They had a proverb in the mountains in those days which claimed that only when the last Caucasian is dead will the mountains be conquered.'

The first Russian attempt to conquer the Caucasus was made by the Russians under Tsar Peter the Great. The broad lands of the Caucasian plains were fair, and Peter wanted ships on the Euxine Sea; besides, a flotilla on the Caspian would have kept the many Volga pirates in order. This land was nominally in Persian hands, and as it happened the Persians were busily engaged in a civil war at the time that Peter the Great decided to strike for the Caucasus. He met with little resistance, and the khans, the governors and satraps of Persia answered the call of the White Tsar with alacrity. They transferred their allegiance to him overnight, and so it did not take Peter very long to subdue the coastline right up to the Khanate of Shirvan, which included the city of Baku. But nothing in the world would persuade that sagacious ruler to march into the mountains. He merely laid claim to the coastline, stating that the wilds of Daghestan were 'conquered',

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and the Persians agreed. The Russians left a general as a viceroy and a small garrison and withdrew to fight other European wars.

The very speed with which this 'conquest' was accomplished surprised and pleased the Russians. Men said, 'Of course, it was Peter's generalship.' But the Persians, cunning as ever, were only too glad to give the Russians this chaotic border country, where wars flared up, bandits ran loose, and disorder and robbery prevailed right up to the city gates of Baku. Little did this famous conquest bring the Russians, and when Peter died the Caucasus was forgotten, until some mud-bespattered messenger arrived in Moscow stating that the garrison had been wiped out by the Lazghis and that they had stolen everything of value from the Russians and departed for the hills. Punitive expeditions were sent, but rarely found their prey. In the end the Russians decided on diplomacy and began to 'persuade' many important Persians to clamour for their lost brothers, the Caucasians. This trick did not work, and the Persians only too gladly saw the Russians struggling with the country, pouring out money and men in an attempt to police an area nearly a third as large as Europe itself. In the end, where persuasion failed gold succeeded, and the Russians joyfully gave over their 'protectorate' to the Persians and sighed with relief. But life did not change very much in the Caucasus. The Shah was just as far away as the Tsar and no more and no less generous or tyrannous. Now and again there were battles and new princes were made and old ones were executed, but life went on as before.

It was only when Taymurazi, King of Georgia, a very old man, decided to appeal to Catherine the Great, erstwhile German princess Sophia von Anhalt-Zerbst, to help him keep



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order in his country that the Russians again took some interest in the kingdom. It appears that the Lazghis, a brave warrior tribe, who had attracted malcontents and adventurers from Georgia, had begun to ravage the country systematically and old Taymurazi went to the stern Tsaritsa and asked for her aid against his rebellious subjects and enemies. He came in 1760, but it was not until 1769 that Catherine and her adviser decided to do anything for the old king. As a matter of fact Catherine, who was then engaged in a war with Turkey, saw an excellent opportunity of using the Christian Georgians and other tribes against Turkey. A strange young man called Count Valerian Subov, the brother of Count Plato Subov, lover and confidant of the aged Catherine, was put in charge of an army which it was said would conquer not only the Caucasus, but Persia, Turkey, and India as well!

Valerian Subov had the looks of an Alexander, but, alas, not the fighting qualities. He was twenty-one years of age and had carefully read up Plutarch's *Lives*. But the Caucasians laughed when they heard that a 'baby general' had been sent against them, and refused to take the 'war' seriously. They fêted the young man, compared him to the great Macedonian, offered him expensive presents, and did homage to him. They gave him huge keys inlaid with silver and gold, and found that he was very satisfied at this gesture, and hung them up with the name of the town 'from which he had received this sign of conquest'. But they also slyly attacked and killed many Russian soldiers. They plundered his stores and stole expensive ornaments from his own person, but they flattered him. He himself wrote to Catherine the Great in the following manner:

'The conquered people weep tears when they hear your

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Majesty's name, and fall to the ground and give thanks to the Almighty for all his blessings and for allowing them to be the contemporaries of your Majesty. Even to think upon the possibility of being permitted to kiss your Majesty's hand makes them the happiest people on earth.'

The Baby General saw nothing of the territories he had 'conquered'. The princes kept him in their palaces until late at night, feasting him, getting him drunk, and putting him to bed with beautiful maidens. And all the time they laughed at him, and read Catherine's letters to them with amazement. But somewhere farther south General Todleben, who had so gallantly fought against Frederick the Great and had defeated him, was hammering at the Turks. As fortune would have it, Catherine died and her son, Paul, came to the throne, and the Subovs together with all his mother's favourites were executed or banished to their estates. Thus ended the adventure of Count Valerian Subov, and the armies he left behind him in the Caucasus were either destroyed or absorbed by the mountains.

It was only in 1803, when Paul Dmitrivitch Tzitzianov came to Tiflis as a successor of a Russian general called Knorring, that Transcaucasia began to take the shape of a Russian province. He was a Georgian himself, a bold man, witty, a good soldier and an excellent administrator. Descendant of the Tzitzishvili, in three years he did more good for the Caucasus than all the other viceroys and generals in five decades. Some may call him a renegade, but it was an age of renegades, and he served his adopted country to make his own better governed and better administered.

'My father used to speak well of this Paul Dmitrivitch,' said Shota, when we came to the subject of the Russian conquest,

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'and he said the people were glad when he swept away the hordes of princes who lived on them, and stamped out the khans. Why, I myself remember a famous letter he sent to one of these gentry, I think it was to the Sultan of Elis. He said, 'Yours is the soul of a dog and the understanding of an ass.' While to the Emperor Alexander he wrote, 'Fear and greed are the two mainsprings of everything that takes place here. These people's only policy is force and their rulers' mainstay valour, together with the money requisite to hire Daghestanis. For this reason I adopted a system of rule contrary to that hitherto prevailing and instead of paying, as it were, tribute in the shape of subsidies and gifts intended to mitigate mountain manners, I myself demand tribute of them.'

Thereafter things went bad for the Caucasians. The sons of Irakli, of whom Frederick the Great of Prussia had said, '*Moi en l'Europe, et en l'Asie l'invincible Hercule,*' were fighting their last fight for freedom. Georgia at this time was under the rule of the Persians, who were mild and generous masters, but George XII found himself in a very bad position when his brothers revolted and wanted to drive him off his throne. He appealed to Russia for help, and very soon Russia engaged the Persians and drove them out. The old King had the satisfaction of hearing the conquerors swear in the name of the Tsar that Georgia would remain free. Said the Tsar, 'It is not that we may extend our empire, which is in any case the greatest on earth, that we undertake to protect the kingdom of Georgia.' This manifesto was actually cast in bronze and set up in the principal street of Tiflis. I myself was to see it some weeks later when I arrived in Tiflis, despite the fact that when George XII of Georgia died the Russians took over the kingdom and declared it to be a Russian province.

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'Of course, the Georgians weren't going to endure that,' said Shota. 'People rebelled and the royal family went into the mountains to carry on the war; Georgia's last queen, Tamara by name, remembered her namesake, Tamar the Great, who lived six centuries ago, and fought the Russians bravely. She killed a Russian general with her own hand, and they banished her to Siberia. That was the end of Georgia. Her thousand-years-old independence was no more, although rebellions continued to flare up every so often.'

But Georgia was not the whole of the Caucasus, although to Shota she was the most important of all the provinces. The same hard task of subjugation had to be undertaken by the Russians in each of the other provinces, and the war against the Caucasus went on for over sixty years.

'We were not afraid of the oppressor. The Caucasus has seen many a tyrant break his teeth on our mountains. I have not told you, but cuneiforms have been found showing that the Assyrians and Babylonians had attempted to subjugate us. There are Greek coins and statues in Colchis that show that they tried to colonize our country. There are Roman legends carved into the mountains in inaccessible spots; we have Genoese towers, Moorish palaces, and Byzantine churches, and the ruins that Tamerlaine and his hordes made of them as they passed. The greatest conquerors of all ages have visited us. Their names? Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Alexander, Pompey, Attila, Jenghiz Khan, Timur called Tamerlaine. They all came and went, leaving their small marks upon our hills, marks that ants might envy. But it needed the Christians to come to commit the greatest cruelties, to perpetrate the biggest crimes.'

Despite Shota's impassioned tone and his bitterness at the

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injustices the Caucasians had suffered at the hands of the Tsars, I always felt an undercurrent of sympathy in all that he said when he spoke of the people.

‘The Russians, like all nations, have a genius,’ he said to me seriously. ‘And your average Russian mistrusted the adventures, depredations, political murders that a policy of imperialism dictated as necessary for “winning the friendship of the Caucasian peoples”. Their poets—famous among them, Lermontov and Pushkin—extolled the virtues of the mountain people, often enough feeling a bond of deep friendship and love for us. We honour them in the same way as the Mohammedans honour Jesus. We call them our own poets, for they protested and they suffered. They were brave men and we shall remember them.’

I was young, very young in those days. I had been taught to regard the Caucasus as a land of preposterous legends, inhabited by a savage people to whom the Russians had brought enlightenment. I believed in the ‘civilizing influence’ until I came to the hills and met with the real civilization, which is based on honour and a rough mountain justice. I will not say that this was a civilization in which I should particularly care to live, for it was not a civilization adapted for the city; but from the inherent characteristics of the people of the mountains I learned one thing. The people are neither the princes nor the priests, but the shepherds, the rough abreks, the swashbuckling twopenny-ha’penny bandits, and those that dwelt in primitive auls. From them came the poetry, from them came the deep yearning that is to be found in all nations—for freedom and justice.

In later years I met nationalistic extremists, the Armenian Dashnaks, Georgian ‘patriots’, Azerbaijan ‘irredentists’, a

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minority claiming to struggle for national 'independence', in reality a handful of exiles trying to boss the meadows. Fascists one and all, or misguided romantics. Shota was not one of these. In the passage of time he stands out as a fine figure, a man who was long-sighted enough to realize that any Caucasian confederacy based upon nationalistic claims was bound to fall.

'I don't want an independent Georgia,' he said to me, 'because I know that a small country must needs fall back on the support of one of its strong neighbours.'

Frankly I did not understand what he meant at the time. I imagined that the Georgians were anxious to break away from the Russian yoke, but Shota disillusioned me.

'We do not want to and we cannot break away from the Russians,' he said. 'An island might just as well break away from the sea. We want to be partners in a common enterprise, not pawns in the hands of Russians and Turks or the rival ambitions of other European powers.'

Prophetic words. Here in exile, the handful vociferously cried for 'liberation', using Germany as a rallying point for their personal ambitions. A tragi-comic farce was being played out by the self-styled 'generals' and 'members of provisional governments'. And here, even in exile, these 'liberators' are split into innumerable groups, some inclining to Turkey, others to Germany. Turkey, as it happens, has refused to play at catspaw, while the Germans have given tacit and underground support in order to discomfit their 'friend' Soviet Russia. Witness the absurdity prevalent among the exiled 'princes' of Caucasia, when Armenians refuse to co-operate with Georgians and Azerbaijanians even in exile! What would happen if these gentry were to return to the homes of their fathers? But between them and their ambitions stand

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the formidable and united peoples of Caucasia, with a free culture and educational system and a constantly increasing spate of prosperity. The fabulously rich land of the Argonauts is yielding up its treasures. Oil flows in abundance, gold is mined, ores ranging from alum to radium, lead, and copper are all being dug up, and the beautiful valleys are full of produce, cereals, fruit. It is no exaggeration to say that a man can spit on the earth here and a child is born to him. The fruits are double the size found even in California! The untold wealth of the Caucasus is slowly coming to the surface for the enrichment of the people's lives, so no wonder the 'liberators' in exile and their German masters spend valuable time in dreaming and scheming to get hold of this land. The dictates of fate are strange, but the Caucasian people will have no truck with those who wish to put a yoke on their shoulders, and in the same passionate way they have fought all invaders, they will fight again, in every valley, from every crag and mountain top.

'There was one Russian governor', Shota was telling me, 'whom we Caucasians respected. He was a thorough rascal. His name was General Ermolov, and the Tsar of the day, Alexander, sent him down with the ambitious mission of pacifying once and for all our troublesome people. He went around as if he held a mandate from Caesar, a sort of Pontius Pilate, only more cunning and incapable of washing his hands white of the "blood to come".'

This Ermolov was an interesting figure, and somewhere in my own family we count him as an ancestor. This is not said in pride, but rather in sorrow. But he was a bold man, and the Caucasians love a bold man whether he uses his boldness in the name of good or evil.

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'He arrived in the Caucasus about a hundred years ago,' said Shota. (The Caucasians have a memory as long as the Irish when they think of Londonderry and Cromwell.) 'He had a large army with him and a few renegades to show him the lie of the land, but General Ermolov was a man of base passions, or rather he was a virile man and one attracted to the legendary beauty of our Caucasian ladies.'

Like Saint Augustine, he must have exclaimed, 'These are not Circassians, but Angels,' if one may parody the good saint's words. And he proceeded to build himself a very handsome house and people it with the choicest ladies of the land. The fruits of his labours on behalf of Caucasian pacification were legitimized by the Tsar, and so it isn't surprising that with so many children, quite a number of families in the Caucasus have a vague relationship with the doughty soldier.

'You mustn't think', Shota smiled, 'that the general was capable only in the boudoir. He was an excellent administrator in the sense that he began to study us Caucasians very carefully. He learnt our tricks, I suspect, from his many wives. He was equal to some of our own princes' perfidies and managed to acquire a very extravagant mode of address, calling people he was about to execute or whose villages he was going to burn "Lions of wisdom" and such-like nonsense. By this means he was able to cover up his intentions, and many a "Lion of Wisdom" found his home destroyed and his wives and children carried away after he had returned from the general's hospitable table. This was definitely un-Caucasian, but the general pleaded that he was an Unbeliever and therefore even a breach of hospitality was permissible to him. But he was a formidable soldier for all that, and no less capable in



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political matters when his armies were insufficient or his position difficult.'

It was at this point that Shota quoted a most interesting anecdote that seems to eclipse any fatuity uttered by the notorious Baron Munchausen, and I give the story for what it is worth, without claiming authenticity.

It appears that at some time or other General Ermolov had to go to the Court of Persia to discuss with the Shah certain matters relating to the frontiers of his domain. He proposed a demarcation commission that would establish where the Caucasus and Persia began and ended. But the Persians would have none of it. The Shah said he liked an elastic frontier because it enabled his frontier guards to live on the caravans that came from Shirvan. The general protested and said something about the Russian Pax. The Shah was no scholar so far as Latin was concerned, so Ermolov departed and began swotting up the Persian poets. It is said that at the end of a week he had learnt huge chunks of Omar and other courtly poets, not forgetting some poetry of the Shah's ancestors, full of intricate and nostalgic stuff about roses and nightingales. He tried these out on the Shah. The Shah listened politely, complimented the general on his excellent memory, and retaliated by quoting some Russian poet, in very bad Russian. He quoted solidly for over three hours until the general was dizzy with mispronounced words and begged indulgence to retire.

But he was not defeated. Perhaps it was by accident or by intention that the general opened the Koran and found a very significant passage—to reveal which at this point in the story would deprive it of its effect.

So armed, he prepared his plans and invited the Persian Vizier, or Prime Minister, to his house some days later, when

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the following conversation is reported to have taken place.

'Staff of Persia, Illustrious Vizier of whom Omar would have written in glowing words were he alive, answer me one question. Art thou prepared to grant a frontier rectification?'

The Persian, long fed on the honey of words, answered :

'Staff of Russia, eaglet beneath the throne, honoured guest, if thou wert the descendant of Darius himself, I would be forced to answer you in the negative.'

Perhaps it was this remark, and not the quotation out of the Koran, that enabled Ermolov to make his master-stroke. He said nothing for a while, and then without the least warning he leapt up on to a divan and began making a most frightful noise. He beat his chest like a gorilla, pulled his eyelids down, and stuck out his tongue, all the while growling and howling at the astonished Staff of Persia. The Vizier gazed with the fascination of a chicken looking at a python. His beard trembled like an aspen leaf, and when the Staff of Russia began to leap about the room, blocking the exit with a debris of broken crockery and furniture, the Persian began to be afraid.

'Allah, Allah,' he prayed, 'and the man was sensible a few moments ago!'

'Call not on Allah,' roared the general, tearing off his decorations and pulling up his tunic, 'but pray rather to the gods of the Tartars. Worm, clayling, dust in the mouth of dead sheep, listen to me. I am the son of Jenghiz Khan, many times removed by other sons, but a direct descendant. Have you forgotten what he did to Persia and the piles of skulls he left after he had visited Teheran? Have you forgotten?'

Then without any further ado, General Ermolov divested himself of his gold embroidered jacket and revealed his breast.

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'See here,' he said, pulling open his vest and revealing a large black dragon that stretched from nipple to nipple, 'that, you Staff of Persia, is the sign of the Great Khan. Bow down and tremble!'

The wretched Persian gave one loud screech and galloped out of the room, right into the arms it seems of the general's aide-de-camp. The scene had been prearranged.

'Forgiveness, Excellency,' said the aide-de-camp with a straight face, 'but I must tell you something. Our general is a wonderful soldier and a direct descendant of the mighty Khan, but unfortunately he is a little unbalanced, if you understand what I mean? It's his blood we fear. The Tsar himself sent him to the outskirts of his empire because he was afraid of him. Please do not mention this to anybody, Excellency, otherwise I should have my head cut off by the general.'

While this prepared recital was being given, General Ermolov was yelling and stamping about in the next room. The unhappy Persian fled to his royal master and told him the whole tale, and they both agreed with the Koran, which says, 'Never contradict a madman'. Ermolov obtained his frontier rectifications without any war, and the Shah showered many expensive presents on the 'descendant of Jenghiz Khan', so that he was able to buy himself a goodly portion of Russian land and live like a gentleman for ever. But living like a gentleman did not appeal to Ermolov, and he is next heard of in 1822 repeating his successes as a madman, forcing territory under the Tsar's rule by similar tricks in the far reaches of Siberia and Turkistan, whither he took his full harem of Caucasian beauties, adding a few here and there as he came cross the strange and unknown peoples of Central Asia.

## Chapter 8

# THE CASTLE OF LOVE AND BETRAYAL

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Boisterous devils, these,  
sipping fermented koumis;  
whoremongering; too impatient  
to untie the traditional  
one thousand knots in a virgin's  
leather corset before taking her to wife;  
slitting open the sash-bands with their teeth  
and kissing away the frightened tears  
in the maiden's eyes—giving her their long  
moustaches to hold on to in her pain.

*Caucasian Savage*, adapted by GEORGE SAVA

Y ou know how one thing and another leads to a sudden turn in the conversation? We began by discussing the astonishing career of General Ermolov and his harem, and before we knew what we were saying we were on the subject of Love.

'I would not say that Ermolov was not a good lover or an affectionate husband, although how he remembered the names of all his wives I do not know,' Shota was saying on

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one of those evenings when we had imposed ourselves on the generosity of some Mountain Jews.

I don't know whether I should say a few words about these extraordinary people, or whether I should record some of the astonishing things Shota had to say about 'mountain love' before I turn to the subject of this curious race. Love, however, is notoriously impatient and the Jews will have to wait.

'Read our songs,' said Shota, 'whether from China, from Malay, from Persia, from the Caucasus, and you will understand the oriental attitude to love. You Europeans smile when you think of our love. But you are fools in this matter, taking your concepts from the pictures on boxes of Turkish Delight that commercially minded Greeks have sent beyond the seas. I will quote you a verse from Rustaveli, poet of Georgia, son of the East. Then you will understand.

*'Love is something very beautiful but difficult to know.*

*Love is something different, not to be likened to voluptuousness.*

*It is one thing, voluptuousness is another, they are far away and apart.*

*Do not mistake the one for the other!'*

I must enjoin the reader of these notes to remember that verse, because otherwise what Shota had to say on the subject of love will be misunderstood and distorted. And that would be a pity. I myself lived many of my early years in the East, first in Turkistan and then in the Caucasus, and though I will not claim any intimate knowledge of the habits and ways of Eastern people, I can claim that Shota's words are true and that love in the Orient is not 'the picture on a box of Turkish

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Delight'. Not voluptuousness; not harems; not cruel husbands; not Bluebeards. It is none of these. Nor is it full of shalimars and 'less than the dust beneath thy chariot wheel', as Mr. Laurence Hope made us believe in the credulous 1904's.

Let Shota tell us himself what love is.

'The one thing strangers cannot recognize', said Shota, 'is that in the Orient our love is not a thing for public sight. We do not go about arm in arm, nor do we sit over tables in cafés holding hands. But that doesn't mean that our youth is any the less romantic or our love any the less real.'

I must say that I found this to be true. I have seen young men with burning eyes and with parched lips, but not once have I seen any 'familiarity' such as may be seen in our Western parks or restaurants. I neither condemn one custom nor approve the other.

'The point to notice about our lovers and our poets is that the word "ashuk" means not only poet, but lover as well, for how can a man write poetry who is not in love with beauty, if not with a woman?'

Shota always had a disconcerting way of changing the subject suddenly to something quite unexpected.

'And we admire our lovers and our poets. For they keep our traditions inviolate and our love the hidden and beautiful thing that it is.'

That is what must be remembered about the Oriental's love. It is hidden. I don't mean that it is hidden behind veils and harem walls, although it used to be. Even now, in days of what we call 'enlightenment', the Oriental will never make a show of affection towards his wife or his fiancée in front of strangers. The greater the love, the more he will, so it

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seems, disparage the beloved, going sometimes to the extent of pretending that they are merely new acquaintances!

‘Our lovers weep, as lovers do the whole world over, but not on the laps of their mothers or in the drawing-rooms of friends. They weep in solitude. Because of this absence of “love” in the open, the Western man thinks we are sensualists and leaves it at that. But that is only half the story, and not as true as is imagined by all those famous travellers “who come to see the East”. They have no perception of our love; therefore, because they are unable to see it, they maintain that it isn’t there!’

I have often heard this argument, and Eastern friends of mine are equally strong in decrying what they call ‘the demonstrative sensuality of the West’. At least, they say, the old potentates did not conceal their sensuality under the guise of ‘art’. The ‘dirty postcards’ of Suez and Aden and Cairo and other places are there for the foreigners who like that sort of ‘art’. Witness the countless ‘film’ magazines of half-nude beauties, and the ‘revues’ with their near-indelicacies, and their ‘statues’! That is Western hypocrisy!

‘Know this, that in the East’, Shota insisted, ‘we have a ritual common to every strand, be it in Algiers or Mandalay. We fall in love according to precept, make love according to precept, declare our love according to the same precept, be it in steamboat or in a violet garden in Teheran or Tabriz. We have love signs that are common to us all, but these signs the Westerner does not understand. And were he even to learn them, he would still not understand! They are in the blood, not things to be acquired.’

I thought that Shota was exaggerating a little when he said

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that, because the East is slowly changing, but he corrected this impression.

‘I know there are changes in the East, and old habits are dying—and I am glad that they are, when they cause discomfort and bring about injustice and evil—but here in the hills the change will take a long time. Our love begins at the fountain.’

The fountain! There is some strange magic in water, and the place of water has been revered in the East from time immemorial. So it is even in European Bulgaria and the other Balkan countries. Love begins near a well.

‘You have seen our unmarried maidens going down to the well every evening. They go without protection, unaccompanied—the only time in the day they are allowed out without a guardian to watch over them—for the old people know that the hallowed tradition of youth may break the older law that a young woman shall not go unaccompanied, and they stay at home.’

Yes, I had seen what Shota described often enough, not only in the Caucasus but in Bulgaria. The ‘introduction’ by a well is as old as the days of Abraham and Sarah, but it is a colourful scene. The young men stay at some distance, in a sort of semi-circle, and talk, careful not to give any sign of recognition to the young ladies as they trip to the well with their pitchers balanced daintily on their smooth brown shoulders, covered, alas, but covered lest voluptuousness and not love should enter into the lover’s heart.

‘We call it a passing of glances,’ said Shota.

‘Good heavens! You don’t mean to say that’s the only form of introduction that these people have to one another?’

‘Precisely.’ Shota’s eyes danced merrily. ‘The girls linger



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by the well, lifting up the heavy pitchers, and then they can cast back their veils. That is when it happens.'

'What happens?'

'The love-sign I was just telling you about,' Shota answered, amused, I think, at my inquiries, which showed that I really did not understand the subtlety of this love-making.

'Who makes the first glance, so to speak?' I asked.

'Why, the girl, of course. She has noted all the men before, because she's been coming to the well many times, and suddenly her glance falls on some favoured man.'

'But hasn't her mother warned her of love at first sight?'

'Possibly, but that doesn't matter. She is impelled that way, and you'd be surprised how often this instinct is right. You must remember that intuition is more developed among us, "less civilized" people, than among people in the cities. This glance the girl gives, by the way, is quite accidental; or at least that's what it is meant to be.'

'And what happens if the favoured young man doesn't happen to glance back just at that moment?'

'Then she comes the next day and again "accidentally" glances; and he finally does. But the truth is this, and you know it as well as I do. Eyes have a way of burning themselves into people's consciousness. I've seen you turn round often enough to the hills, knowing that someone was looking at you from a crag, although you couldn't see him. Horses have this sense developed to an extraordinary degree, and all mountain people as well.'

'Granted,' I said. 'Then what happens?'

'When the young man understands, and if he is serious minded and hasn't been casting many glances at other girls, and if he feels in his heart that he has found his "true mate",

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he can do two things. He can either send his mother and father or some elderly people among his relatives to "hand over her price"; that is a sort of present to the father who has reared such a beautiful daughter. The compliment, you will observe, comes from the husband in the first place.'

'And what is the alternative plan if he hasn't got any relatives or enough money to buy himself this bride?' I asked, trying as usual to catch Shota out with a thorny problem.

'Why, he goes out and makes money!'

'And how does he do that?' I was suspicious.

'He probably goes off on a thieving expedition,' Shota said laughingly. 'I'm telling you, of course, about some of the more banditry-inclined of the mountain tribes.'

'Oh, I'm not perturbed,' I answered. 'From what I have heard and seen of some of them I can well understand that there is little else for them to do, when taxation, slavery, and unjust princes are about. But supposing he can't even be a good thief, or he can't find a fat merchant, what then?'

'He has one final resort. It is the boldest one of all. If his love is very strong, he merely kidnaps the girl. He creeps up to the house at night, or perhaps when the maiden is unprotected for a moment, and swings her on to his saddle, and away they go, usually to seek the protection of the local prince, who is supposed to be kind to lovers.'

'Why, Shota,' I cried, 'don't you think that's exactly what happened to my sister?'

'Quite possible. I never thought of that,' said Shota. 'We'll have to visit a few princes in their strongholds, if we can find any of them that aren't in Saint Petersburg drinking champagne and playing about with harlots. That's quite possible.'

I must say that I felt very miserable for the rest of Shota's

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recital, but he, kind soul, knowing of my depression, regaled me with many more stories on marriage customs.

‘It may be very inconvenient for the prince, as you can imagine,’ he said.

‘Why inconvenient? Surely he doesn’t have to have his house full of lovers, does he?’

‘No, but custom decrees that he should keep them as long as the girl’s parents are on the war-path, and when their anger has calmed down he goes to them and speaks for the young lovers and begs them to forgive them.’

‘What if the parents are adamant?’

‘They rarely are. After all, it’s as much the girl’s fault as the boy’s.’

‘Agreed. But what happens if he abducts the girl against her wish? Kanly?’

‘Yes. Our relatives have declared kanly against your sister’s abductor. But let’s go on.’ Shota wanted to get away from the subject of my sister as quickly as possible. I wondered why.

‘Shota,’ I said, ‘have you heard anything about my sister?’

‘No,’ he said. I left it at that. ‘Shall I tell you what happens in the ordinary way, once there is an understanding between the girl’s and the boy’s family?’

‘Yes. I’m told they begin to dance. Is that true?’

‘No, not immediately they are “engaged in their glances”. They do not talk to each other for a long time. They are always separate, until one day at a festival or a wedding, the “lesginka”—the dance of the Lesghian people—is played on what we Georgians call the “tar” and the “kemantcheh” and the tambourines. The young man comes out of the crowd and begins to dance, but first he comes before the girl he loves and

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bows low to her. Then the music strikes and he begins.'

I have often seen this curious, half-erotic, fiery dance, so wild, and yet so tender. After the man has danced for a while, the girl breaks away from her comrades and dances with him. I have seen many "fake" representations of this dance in Paris, and no doubt many of my readers have witnessed them too, but the real thing is very different. It is a lover's dance, and yet unbetraying; it is suggestive of deep love, but subtle enough not to make it the common property of the on-lookers.

'It is also for this reason that the lovers do not speak to each other,' Shota said. 'There are so many ears always present that their love is best unsaid. They know it. What are words?'

'But don't they ever meet—alone? Don't they have a chance to say a few soft words to each other?' I asked.

'Oh, yes. When the afternoons are very hot and people have retired behind their shutters for a siesta, or perhaps in the late evening when the moon is up, they meet.'

'At last!' I sighed.

'But they don't sit together.'

'What, not yet?'

'No. They sit a few yards apart and talk. The man usually talks.'

'What does he say? Does he talk about the weather?'

Shota smiled good-naturedly at my ragging.

'No, he tells her a fable, some strange allegorical tale that will proclaim his love, but he mustn't say things like "I love you" or "When will you be mine?"—otherwise someone might overhear and their idyll would be shattered. He may, if he has a good memory and is educated, recite something

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from, in our case—particularly in Georgia—Rustaveli or the loves of Vis and Ramin, called the *Visramiani*.’

‘Can’t you recite something to me, Shota?’ I begged.

‘I can, but if anyone hears they may think you a girl disguised as a boy.’

‘Nevertheless,’ I said, ‘a few lines—please.’

Shota did not speak aloud, but whispered, his voice eerie among the rocks:

‘The boy is very bitter, it seems, and his love was a long time coming, so he says, with Ramin: I stand here in the snow and frost, and thou art comfortable in a warm house scented with musk and hast begun to talk of a thousand vain things. This is not a time for comfort and luxury! Thy conversation and thy beauty are equally inexhaustible; while as for me, death is thirsting for me through the keenness of the air.’

‘Beautiful,’ I commented. ‘That must certainly make her repent her tardiness. But when is the marriage celebrated?’

‘Shortly after these conversations. It’s very complicated and there are many preliminaries.’

‘But it’s worth it, I suppose? It seems to me that so much is placed in the way of the married couple that only those truly in love can possibly go through all the waiting and the ceremonies.’

‘That’s exactly it,’ said Shota. ‘Ah, my boy, if you knew how long it took me before I got married.’

‘No money, I suspect, Shota?’

‘Right.’

‘So you became a bandit?’

‘Right again. But that was before I turned to politics.’ Shota stopped abruptly. He had clearly said something he did not intend.

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'I see,' I said, 'that explains your advice to the commissar in Khevsuria, Shota? I'm sorry I noticed it, but if you don't want me to I shan't say a word. Perhaps going with me means going out of your way?'

'No,' said Shota, 'don't speak of it like that. I have been with your family for twenty years; you are my friends and I shall find the girl, your sister. And say nothing about my politics. One day—soon—I shall return to them.'

I was glad for the explanation of the 'soon' that so constantly crept into Shota's words and dreams. He continued with his description of the Caucasian marriage treaty.

'A short while before the marriage actually takes place the elaborate dowry arrangements must be prepared by the girl and her parents, for in the Caucasus it isn't only the husband who gets a dowry, but every single member of the family, old and young, uncles and aunts. These presents in the case of rich families are very elaborate, full of jewels and handsome embroideries. The relatives in their turn give presents to the girl, and all these presents belong exclusively to her throughout her marriage and in the event of divorce.'

'But what does her husband give her?'

'He gives her the biggest present of all. That's his right, and the present, or its value in money terms, is decided before the actual marriage itself. If he's poor, he can pay it in instalments, but if the girl is very much in love with the man she usually waives it aside, saying, "Thy love is enough for me, beloved."'

Shota did not tell me, but later inquiries showed that the present given to the wife had a special significance. It was a kind of compensation to the woman for the pains and discomforts suffered during the first few nights of 'married bliss'.

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Ladies no longer virgins—and by that we understand widows—are not entitled to this ‘pain money’.

‘It might surprise you, Georgi, but the couple do not see each other until some time after the marriage. On the marriage day itself they are brought into a room where a thin curtain has been hung up, and an extraordinary scene takes place.’

This ‘extraordinary scene’ Shota and I witnessed in Mingrelia a few weeks later. Briefly the ceremony is this. The bridegroom does not see his wife-to-be, because it is thought that his ‘manhood’ might suddenly depart from him. Hence the curtain. The boy and girl are allowed, however, to hold hands over the curtain, a flimsy material but strong enough not to allow any sight of the loved one’s face, and the mullah—or Mohammedan priest—then recites his prayers. But the first question to the husband is as follows:

‘You [here he inserts the name], are you able to be the husband of this woman?’

The man usually answers ‘yes’, but before the word has died away on his lips old ladies present step forward and begin mumbling a long incantation to ward off spirits of evil, and to watch out for anyone present who unsheaths his dagger and mutters the dread curse, ‘This man is a liar. He cannot be a husband to this woman.’

Shota explained that the mountain folk feared this curse more than anything else, because the hapless bridegroom would be certain to lose his marital prowess for a whole year and some days, should it be pronounced at the moment the evil spirits are apparently on the watch to do their nefarious business.

The marriage ceremony over, the husband and the wife

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part. She goes to her relatives, and he to his, and great celebrations take place. There is no cutting the cake with your husband's dagger or anything like that, nor does the enamoured man allow himself to drink out of her slipper. But when the singing and dancing and feasting is over, the guests are not very tactful, it seems, in these matters, and persist in lingering until drink clouds their minds and unsteadies their legs. But only in the last extremity can the man then go into his chamber, a room adjoined by his wife's room. And it is only then that the real trial of love begins.

Unfortunate lover, there is no privacy for him. He has to make his way to his wife's apartment, beset at every corner and at every doorway by strange figures who, in their unearthly black veils, look like ghouls. Alas, these are the same old ladies who made incantations, and the only way to remove them, it seems, is to give them a coin or a present. Even then they may haggle and demand a still greater tribute. So far so good, but once our hero has entered the chamber of his beloved, what does he see?

He sees an old crony fast asleep on the divan, or at least pretending to be asleep, and she too will not budge unless suitably rewarded, together with much persuasion and lingering to see 'that everything is all right'. There is nothing suggestive about all this, the old lady simply wants to be useful, or at least so it appears. But she has barely left the room when friends, nice kind friends, unloosen all manner of squawking birds into the bedchamber—chickens, cocks, ducks, baby lambs, and all manner of creeping and crawling things—which set up a dreadful pandemonium and swirl round the room like a hurricane. Again the doughty lover is called upon to use his wits and he chases the farmyard out.



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Is that the end of the torment? By no means. But let Shota tell us the rest of the curious customs.

‘You are wondering,’ he said to me, ‘after the marriage ceremony and all the rumpus that succeeds it, what then?’

I admitted that I was just a little curious. ‘I’m surprised that there are so many marriages here in the hills when every man must have the patience of a saint and the strength of a Hercules. But what happens?’

‘You know, don’t you, that in the Caucasus—differing in this respect from many other oriental nations—we favour slimness?’

I knew that. In fact the slimness and perfection of figure of the Caucasian girl was a legend in the East.

‘Well this slimness is not always a gift from birth. The girls have to make serious efforts by the recognized means, such as diet and corseting, to remain slim, and it is the corseting that causes all the trouble to the husband on the first night. For he, poor man, has all the thousand and one knots to undo that go to the making of one of these corsets of thin morocco leather. These knots are very tight, and are many, and woe to the husband whose impatience leads him to put an end to his agony with his dagger.’

‘He doesn’t kill the poor girl?’ I asked in alarm. Shota looked a trifle hurt at my obtuseness.

‘No, of course not. He loves her, so he unties all the knots rather than cut them away with a dagger. Friends and the same old ladies come in the next day to see the corset, and woe unto him if he betrays any impatience, any lack of control.’

‘And supposing that the man has gone through all these trials and tribulations—surely there are enough of them—doesn’t he get left alone?’

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'Oh, yes. Once he is sure of his wife's virginity he fires a pistol, and then everybody begins to do the same and the festival goes on as long as the guests feel gay. The next day the couple set out for their honeymoon, usually staying with some friends of the family. Here at last they are left in perfect peace. No-one worries them, no-one makes any further inquiries about the corset or throws chickens through their windows.'

'Well, thank the Lord for that. At last they are together.'

'But only for a short time,' said Shota, 'a little time only. The man then takes his bride back to her home and leaves her.'

'What, again?'

'Yes. He may leave her for a few months or for as long as two years. In the meanwhile he prepares a home for her.'

'With his people? Does she have to live with his mother?'

'No. The mother-in-law has no status in the mountains. She is honoured and respected as befits a mother, but she seldom enters the house of her son or daughter-in-law. But the girl's menfolk—such as brothers and father and uncles—are allowed to see the bride as often as they like. Indeed very often it is they who are considered the guardians of the girl's honour, and should anything untoward happen they are to blame for their bad influence and lack of foresight, and the husband revenges himself not on the wife, but on her male relatives.'

The mountain laws are very curious regarding adultery and abduction. I was particularly interested in the latter because of my sister, and although I knew that I was supposed to declare *kanly* against her abductor, I did not know that if at the end of the year he had actually violated her and there-

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fore been compelled to marry her, the kanly would be discontinued and the marriage acknowledged on condition that my sister agreed to live with her abductor. If not, a divorce was automatically granted.

'After all,' the Caucasians argue, 'the man took the risk of being killed by the girl's relatives. He must have loved the girl dearly to do that. Besides, after a year is over the ill-feeling might blow over and the man will pay the family many presents. Who's the loser?'

Such philosophy defeated me at times. But let this be said for the Caucasus as I knew it. The woman is well treated and has many laws to protect her. She does not bring a dowry with her, but a dowry is actually given for her. Her own money and estates can never be passed over to the husband and she can as easily divorce her husband as he can divorce her. Divorce is rare, however, and marriages abundant, despite the many complicated rules of relationship that forbid even the most distant relations to enter into matrimony. The 'brother and sister' tragedies of the Elizabethans often come true in the mountains, where people can get separated so easily by wars and slavery, and many a cousin has pined away for love in the numerous castles that dot the hills, rather than look at another. The Caucasus is full of romantic tales which equal and sometimes surpass the sad tales of Chrestien de Troyes, and of the knight who so palely loitered in Keats' poem.

In Kislovodsk, which we visited—translated literally, 'the place of Sour Waters'—a fashionable resort for the Russian aristocracy, there is a 'castle' called Zamuk Kavarstvo ye Lubvii—the Palace of Love and Betrayal, and it provides a story that is nearly as beautiful as the lovely play by James Elroy

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Flecker that tells of the hapless love of Rafi and Pervaneh. The tale has been told in many different ways, and with differing characters, but they all concern the origin of the Pearl and the Diamond.

The Zumak, or 'castle', is the high ledge, just above the rushing, health-giving waters of the Narsan, and on this cliff's face are written many famous names, together with a lot of infamous ones. The tale as told by Shota, I heard long ago in the dimness of my childhood, and if it is lacking in accuracy I will try to make it up by the colourful idiom of our Georgian servant, prince, and revolutionary, who to this day may live and reign over the mountain peaks, if not in the name of the Tsár's forgotten eagles, then in the name of one of his compatriots—Red Stars.

'There was a great Sultan, whom they called Master of the World, and he was as wise as King Solomon of the Jews and as wealthy, and he made himself a magnificent crown, one-half of which was made of diamonds and the other half of large pearls. And one day when his court poet, a rare singer called Fidusi, asked him the meaning of the blazing jewel, the diamond, and the sheeny sad pearl, this is the story he told. . . .'

There is in the mountains of the Caucasus, a mountain known to men as Elbruz, whose height is the astonishment not only of men, but of the angels, and on the side of the mountain, where the Narsan flows, there is a great cliff. And it so happened that upon a time a man and a maid stood upon it contemplating the last rays of the sun. The maid spoke and said, 'Oh my dearly beloved, my beautiful one, this is the last day for us, for on the morrow I shall wed a rich prince who will take me away and make me his wife.' And then she began

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to cry, large crystal tears, and the young man was touched to the bottom of his heart, so he spoke to her and said (perhaps like Flecker's Rafi, for I have forgotten the words that Shota used and only remember the gist of the tale) that he loved her dearly and that to live without her was to die, and she answered that life without him would be cruel and purposeless for her. So they both decided to commit suicide by jumping off the cliff's face into the swirling waters below.

He did not say: 'Be silent—be silent! Your voice is the voice of a garden at daybreak, when all the birds are singing at the sun. Forget your whirling dreams, your fires, your lightnings, your splendours of the soul, and answer the passionless voice that asks you—why should your lover die, and such a death?'

No, this Caucasian Rafi was braver than that. He did not think of his youth and the glories and pleasures of it that he was leaving untasted.

'I am very young. Shall I forget to laugh if I continue to live? Shall I spend all my hours regretting you? Shall I not return to my country and comfort the hearts of those that gave me birth? Have I not my white-walled house, my books, my old friends, my garden of flowers and trees? Has the stream forgotten to sing at the end of my garden because Pervaneh comes no more?'

'“Love fades,” saith Reason with a gentler voice. “Love fades, but doth not fall. Love fadeth not to yellow like the rose, but to gold like the leaves upon the poplar by the stream.” And when my poplars are all gold, I shall sit beneath their shade beside the stream to read my book. When I am tired of my book I will lie on my back and watch the clouds.

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There in the clouds I shall see your face, and remember you with a wistful remembrance as if you had always been a dream and the silver torment of your arms had never been more than the white mists circling the round mountain snows.'

No, the Caucasian Rafi did not say these words. Perhaps he thought them, poor youth, as he planned the suicide. Could he not also have said, 'If I must not have you, do I care whose wife you be? I shall remember you as you are now—rock water undefiled.'

He kissed his love upon the lips, and looking up at the stars he took hold of her hand. He is tempted to say, no doubt, 'We are both cowards, you and I. The sunlight changes on the wall from white to gold. It is evening. Our time has come. Shall we choose life? Shall we choose the sky and the sea, the mountains, the rivers, and the plains? Shall we choose the flowers and the bees and all the birds of heaven? Shall we choose laughter and tears, sorrow and desire, speech and silence, and the shout of the man behind the hill?'

And what does the girl answer? She also chooses death. Like Pervaneh she says, 'Oh, let us die! Not for my dishonour, Rafi. What is my dishonour to me or you, beloved, or the shame of a girl's virginity to him who made the sea? This clay of mine is fair enough, I think, but God hath cast it in the common mould. O lover, lover, I would walk beneath the walls and sell my body to the gipsy and the Jew ere you should cry, "I am hungry" or "I am cold".'

It is a pity that I do not remember the words of the legend, but Flecker's words are as near to them in sentiment as I can think. The tragedy of Rafi and Pervaneh is great, and the heart is deeply moved, but at least there is some consolation

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that the lovers went to their deaths together, with Pervaneh saying:

‘Sweet life, we die for thy sweetness, O Lord of the Garden of Peace! Come, love, for the fire that beats within us, for the air that blows around us, for the mountains of our country and the wind among their pines you and I accept torture and confront our end. We are in the service of the World. The voice of the rolling deep is shouting, “Suffer that my waves may moan.” The company of the stars sing out, “Be brave that we may shine.” The spirits of children not yet born whisper as they crowd round us: “Endure that we may conquer.”’

And then Rafi says, ‘Die then, Pervaneh, for thy great reasons. No ecstasy can help through the hours of pain. I die for love alone.’

It was for that same reason that the Caucasian youth died in the Sultan’s tale, and as he jumped over the cliff his hand slipped away from his beloved and the dark waters encompassed him with a hiss and he was gone. But the little maiden did not follow his example. She uttered some such cruelty—banal as it must sound—‘Good riddance. I am free to marry my rich prince without this young man on my conscience!’ And marry him she did, but the tears of the young maiden and the boy were left lying on the top of the mountain, so that the sun and the moon was able to shine upon them, and God spoke and said, ‘From this maiden’s tears I shall make a Pearl, and from this youth’s tears, a diamond. And the Pearl is the tear of deceit and betrayal, while the diamond is the tear of true love. Let the Pearl be hid on the bottom of the deepest ocean, while the diamond stays in the heart of the cold granite mountains pierced by the sunshine and the moon-

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light, so that it may gladden me with its sparkle and remind me of my love for the World.'

Thus ended the story of the Sultan, and he pointed to his great crown and said, 'On my crown I have placed both the pearl and the diamond, for I am a Sultan and it is my duty to know both the deceitful cold tears that dwell in the depths and the brilliant light tears of those whom it has pleased God to bless. Allah be with thee, Fidusi!'

And they say that after this incident Fidusi wrote better poems, and the cliff above the waters of the Narsan was called the Castle of Love and Betrayal.



## *Chapter 9*

# THE EMPIRE OF THE KHAZARS

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We had come across isolated groups of Khazars before on our journey to Derbend, but little did I know that these people were Jews by religion. It was only when we happened to be staying in a small settlement in the mountains that I observed the care with which rabbinical lore was being followed by people who looked more like Mongols than Jews. I sought an explanation from Shota, whose knowledge by this time I had come to expect to embrace everything.

‘In the sixth century after Jesus Christ’, he said, ‘there was a great Jewish Empire that stretched from the far steppes of the Volga to the southernmost reaches of the Caspian Sea. El-Musidi enlightens us by saying that “the Kings of the Khazars had no ships on this sea, for the Khazars are no sailors”. The sea he was referring to was the Caspian, once known as the Khazar Sea. But what these Khazars lacked in seamanship they made up for in their commercial sagacity. For two whole centuries their Kagan—or emperor—ruled this part of the world with Aaron’s blossoming rod. Synagogues were built and schools for the teaching of Hebrew, and wandering tribes were caught and circumcized and forced

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into the Jewish faith. But the most astonishing thing about these Khazars is that they were not originally Jews at all, but converts to Jewry!’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Then they are the first people I have heard of who have been converted on a large scale since the heyday of the Jews in Palestine.’

‘That is true. These people came from beyond the Urals, crossing the low hills where they taper down to the south into mere hillocks. There was not a drop of any Semitic blood in them; quite the contrary, all their activities and their instincts pointed to the fact that they were nomads and robbers. They came like locusts on the land and stayed for two centuries, and then perished—as an empire. Their children were sent wandering, as it were, like their religious brothers the Jews, seeking what refuge they could in our hills. Their Kagan was a potentate of the East seated on a golden throne, and once a year, when the peach-blossom lit up in their irrigated gardens, they would turn their eyes towards Jerusalem and sing, “If I should forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning”. They never forgot the Holy City nor their cunning, but prospered, and soon the “liberation of Palestine” became just another dream.’

‘But tell me, Shota, how did they become Jews in the first place?’

‘They were converted, we are told, by Jewish colonists whom they found in the cities they sacked. There is a legend that says they found the Jews counting on a large abacus—and were so fascinated by the little wooden balls going to and for that they thought it a game, and enslaved the Jews and made them teach it to them! The Jews did—with great success, it seems—and the Kagan’s empire grew until it could

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demand tribute from the Christian princes of the Caucasus and even of Kiev. For in those days the Russians were pagans and the Grand Dukes seemed good proselytes to the Khazars; but somehow nothing came of these schemes, otherwise the Russians might have embraced the Jewish faith for all time!

'And then there would have been no pogroms!' I joked. 'But what finally happened to this empire of the Jews?'

'It disappeared. One day the Khazars fought and destroyed Georgia, and another the Arabs came and conquered Georgia and the Khazars and took their strange city of Itil, where Astrakhan now stands. But hardly had the Arabs conquered, when Jenghiz Khan and his hordes swept down from Asia, absorbing their kinsmen the Khazars, and going on to the conquest of Russia and Persia and Turkistan, and in this mêlée the Khazars got lost, and finally again changed their faith and became Mohammedans. The few of them that had remained and had taken refuge against their kinsmen, the Tartars, can now only be found in the mountains, where they share the faith of the real Semitic Jews whom they had conquered in bygone ages. To have Jewish blood is accounted a great honour in the mountains, and some of the most handsome people of the hills are found amongst the purely Jewish mountaineers. These people have long forgotten their glory and consider themselves Caucasians.'

I could judge as much from their manners and from their buildings, which were strikingly similar, although everywhere one turned one saw the sign of David. Only in the houses of the mountain Jews do the manners become strange and reminiscent, so Shota told me, of Palestine. The feet of the guests for instance, are washed by the mistress of the house. The law of the Old Testament still holds good, but its final inter-

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pretation is left to the Khakham-Bashi, the chief priest, who lives in Derbend, whose name may be translated as the 'Supremely Clever'.

'It is curious', said Shota, 'that the language of these mountain Jews is not what you would expect it to be, say Khazar, or perhaps a sort of debased Hebrew. It is a Persian dialect!'

But more curious still was a meal we ate with them, and the suffering that I had to endure when my feet were washed by the mistress of the house, who also insisted on wiping them with her hair! The process was not only embarrassing but ticklish, but as Shota went through with this martyrdom first with the exquisite grace he always showed on these occasions I felt I could do the same.

What really was beyond me was the meal, which consisted principally of roasted mutton fat, without any lean, and tasted very much like household soap. My appetite had been stimulated by the delicious fruits that preceded this course, and after I had eaten my fill of peaches and water-melons I was given crusts of bread on which garlic had been rubbed. These I swallowed with a little difficulty and bade farewell to the sweet, pleasing taste of peaches in my mouth; but the mutton fat I could not stomach. It was not the famous shashlik of the mountains, those succulent little pieces of mutton that are cooked on a sword in live coals, but mere fat. After it, Shota as guest of honour, was induced to partake of a large sheep's head, which had been boiled in a sauce which looked like muddy water. The eyes of this animal are regarded as a delicacy, and when one was handed to me spiked on the end of a knife I glared at the dilated iris in horror.

'Eat, my son,' said Shota with resignation.

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So what could I do but pick up the round eye and, fingering it gently, place it into my mouth. There it stayed, a perfect ball. I dared neither swallow it nor break it with my teeth, and had not Shota diverted everyone's attention by picking up the other eye and swallowing it whole, I fear that I should have choked. As it was, I managed to slip it out of my mouth and surreptitiously bury it in the floor under the mat I was sitting on. Heaven knows what mortal offence I committed, if those people discovered the offensive eyeball! And when I told Shota the story he laughed, and showed me how he had tricked them into thinking he had eaten it. It was a child's trick of sticking one's tongue in the corner of the mouth and sucking it. The eyeball, meanwhile, he secreted in someone's cast-off shoe!

We both wondered that night whether we should be hounded out of the village for the insult we had committed.

But the curious customs of these people do not finish here. The next day Shota and I came across some girls weeping bitterly. Their tear-stained cheeks and tattered appearance proclaimed that they had been weeping for some considerable time, and Shota was not a man to pass by any suffering creature without inquiring what was the matter and helping, if he could.

'What are you weeping for, little maidens?' he asked in Azerbaijani, with a soft pleading voice, knowing how susceptible these people are to insult if you don't mind your own business.

'Our father,' they answered. 'He died so quickly. So quickly. A bare week, and our father was dead.'

Shota commiserated.

'God will be good to him,' he said. 'When did he die?'

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'Ten years ago. Ten years ago,' said the weeping maidens.

Ten years ago! And they were weeping as bitterly as if it was only yesterday! We discovered that this was a peculiarity of the mountain Jews. They not only wept for fathers dead for over ten years, but they also wept for Zion pretty regularly, repeating the famous psalm, 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept'. They would get frightfully miserable for a long time and have a regular orgy of weeping, lasting, it seems, for days on end.

Beyond these observations I can say nothing about the mountain Jews, for they are a very secretive people and are not open with strangers. When we left them, however, they proved most hospitable. Whether it was that they were glad at our departure or not, I don't know, but they insisted that we should take a mule with us, laden with all kinds of provisions, and when we refused, saying that we preferred to travel lightly, as we were passing into the land of the Ossetes, who were notorious robbers—but wisely enough did not steal from poor men—the Jews offered us an escort that was travelling with some merchants on their way to Lars, the city beneath the famous mountain of Kazbek. We decided to accept the mule, and I gave one of the chief rabbis a gold ring I had on my finger and that he had eyed many times before. The escort, however, we did not accept. We did not wish to follow the beaten caravan tracks, knowing that my sister's abductor was much too clever to leave us an open trail.

We struck out boldly for the higher mountain reaches, and after about two days' solid going we reached Ossetia. I don't know whether one can properly call this a country—these empty mountain sides where the Osseti live—for in reality, these rocks are bare, fit to sustain gazelles and nothing more.

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'What, in God's name,' I asked Shota, 'can these people find to live on, in this barren waste?'

'Oh, they are a proud folk,' said Shota, 'and they have a very careful economy and manage somehow. You see, they refuse to mix with the other tribes, which they consider inferior to them.'

The poorer the people are in the Caucasus, the prouder they are, it seemed to me, but the Ossetes consider themselves the aristocrats of the mountains. They stay high up, near the snow-line of the mountains, in order to maintain their self-respect. But whence they came and how, still puzzles the anthropologists, so Shota said at least. They were certainly 'Aryan' or 'Nordic', and I expect that when the long-lost brothers of Hitler's Reich are gathered together, these 'Nordic' Osseti will also become a 'German' minority, grist for the German Dictator's mill.

The Ossetes themselves will not admit that they are German. But in their language there is a variety of things that prove that in some way or other they are kinsmen. In the great mixing of races we are all probably kinsmen, but the Osseti have a history that sounds incredible were it not for the fact that historical research has proved much of what they say to be true.

What does historical research say? A random quotation from Professor Minns informs us that 'On the coming of the Huns, part of the Alans were forced westward, joined the Germans, against whom they were thrown, and ended as the inseparable companions of the Vandals in North Africa. Part of them were pressed up against the Caucasus . . . and about them are the Tartar tribes which penned them in.'

I quote this opinion simply to support what the Ossetes and

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Shota had to say about them. I find their opinions more interesting now that I have some authority to back them, although admittedly their information may not be 'scientific' in the strict sense of the word. But the beginning of races, like the beginning of religions, is often clouded in legend.

'We will tell you who our fathers were,' said one of the Ossetes, when Shota questioned him. He seemed mighty pleased to impart the information. 'They were great warriors.'

This was a fairly usual introduction to one's ancestors, but Shota and I did our very best to be astonished, and said admiringly, 'We have heard many things of your forefathers, but little do we know what is true. Great soldiers they certainly were, but where did they come from?'

'They came from a distant land, far beyond the frontiers of the great queen, the Moon, where it is cold and where men fought in suits of iron. Much more do we know, but we cannot tell.'

It was no use being too curious with these people, but Shota understood the politeness of the mountains and he said, 'We will not trouble the memory of your peerless ancestors that came dressed in iron, but tell us, if you will, why they came to these grey mountains and why you make your home among them.'

The face of our informant grew suddenly sad and his voice seemed burdened with all the sorrows of the past centuries. It was as if he were telling a tale that was but yesterday.

'They were good men, Christians, as we ourselves, and they went to save the Holy Places. . . .'

I was getting more interested. It was astonishing the number of people in the mountains who quite unwittingly traced their descent from the Crusaders. Here was such another tribe.



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'But the great Eiub-ibn-Yussuf, who was a great soldier they say, fought against our fathers, who were few, and slew many of of them, until they fled up to the northern passes and came here.'

'Eiub-ibn-Yussuf', explained Shota, 'is also known as Saladin.'

'Indeed, he is called such by some,' agreed the man, 'but we prefer to name him as an Egyptian, from whence he originally came. Well, our fathers came to the hills and fought the people they found here. People similar to themselves called Alans, and we married their women and forgot our own ways and became like them in many manners and customs, but after we had built our castles and hung up the iron suits of our fathers in memory of their battles for the Cross, came messengers from the king beyond the Black Sea and the lands more distant than that of the Magyars, saying, "Return to your homeland, ye People of Os."'

'And, of course,' said Shota, 'you did not return?'

'Some did,' admitted the man, 'and they went with the priests whom the Lord of our former land had sent, but the rest of us refused. We liked the land we had conquered and the castles we had built, and besides we had married and had children, and we had changed our language. Said our fathers, "How shall we return, we who have lived two decades in the hills? The air is sweet to our nostrils here, and we have grown accustomed to the flowers. Tell the Lord our King to forget us, and let him also say to the wives we left behind, 'We divorce you, for we are dead to you.'"' And the priests returned and we never saw them again, and so our people went on building their castles and their churches, and proclaimed that five hills shall belong to them in perpetuity and let no man take them away.'

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Why anyone should have bothered to interfere with the lives of the Osseti I can't imagine. They lived, as I said, in the most inaccessible places. Their 'castles' were curious imitations of European palaces; there was the same medieval pointed tower, for instance, but on a much smaller scale. There was very little pasturage, and their sheep looked emaciated and weak from lack of fodder, in strange contrast with the Ossetes themselves.

We had found this obliging gentleman under a crag, sheltering from the sun, it seemed, near the fringe of the snow, and it was only when he volunteered to lead us to their castle settlement for refreshment that I was able to see him properly. And what a sight met my eyes! The man was over six foot tall, dressed in sheep skins and brightly coloured rags, and wore a small painted cross on his forehead. His face was tanned, but, despite that, I could see that his skin was really as fair as his hair. As for his eyes—they were bright blue. Here was a living proof of a tall story, if you like!

'Don't you', I asked timidly, 'ever go down into the valleys with your sheep?'

The man laughed contemptuously.

'Only the inferior people of our tribe do that. We call them the Valley Ossetes. We stay in the mountains, as befits princes.'

'But there is so little pasturage here that I wonder how you manage to feed your sheep,' I dared.

'The answer, stranger, is that they feed on what they can get. It is enough for them and enough for us.'

I did not question the man any further, but when Shota and I were alone he imparted to me the following gruesome information about these blue-eyed people.

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'I expect you are wondering why there are so few people in this settlement?'

I admitted I did.

'It's a question of food. They cannot support a larger number on the pasturage, which you yourself observed was very poor. So instead of going to find better pasturage for their sheep, they have less sheep, and therefore less people. You must understand that to be a mountain Osseti is a privilege for the princes of the tribe, and I expect they don't want to have too large a family of those, so they keep down the population by artificial means.'

'Artificial means? What does that mean?'

'Do you know what the Spartans did with their baby girls?'

I did. 'They left them on the mountain sides to be devoured by wolves or die of cold and starvation.'

'The Ossetes are more humane. They strangle their children, both male and female, who exceed a quota—say of about double the amount of deaths in their settlement. By this means they keep a constant population.'

'But surely, if they double the number of people who die, that means their population is bound to increase?'

'Not at all. Half of that number die anyway as babies. They take that into consideration, you see. They and they alone are allowed to call themselves Allemans. The valley people of like descent cannot make this claim.'

Now, Alleman is the name for German in the East and the fact that these people call themselves Germans boldly and proudly brings us to some startling conclusions. The first is that undoubtedly their ancestry is traced not only from the Huns, but also from the Germanic Crusaders. As fighters

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these men were incomparable, and in the wars of Irakli—the Hercules of Georgia—these Osseti did good service.

‘The auxiliary troops required by the kings arrived at Ananuri. There were Cherkez, Kalmuks, Jiks, Kists, Ghlighwis, Nogais and Ossetians; each nation commanded by its chiefs and professing a particular religion—Islam or more generally idolatry; some uncouth men, feeding on foul and unclean food, some of superb appearance, others of hideous ugliness, hairless and beardless, with excessively coarse noses; all, in battle, fine horsemen and intrepid archers.’

This is one of many occasions that the Osseti are quoted by Brosset, the French historian of the Caucasus, and I think it is safe to say that the Osseti were always to be found in the vanguard of any fight, proudly proclaiming, ‘We are the real descendants of the Christian knights.’

But except for their words and the small discoveries of the anthropologists and etymologists, to prove the Osseti Germans is a hard task. The Osseti treat the whole matter with deserved contempt. ‘Haven’t we told you who our ancestors are? Aren’t our words good enough?’

But of proof, hard matter-of-fact proof of their descent, there is very little. I myself saw a few broadswords such as may be found in other parts of the mountains and such as I have already described when we were in Khevsuria. These broadswords admittedly were of a heavier kind and bore markings of Gothic lettering. More important are their documents, made of parchment, on which are written many names that are clearly German, although the language of the documents is not Germanic, but Syrian.

‘I wouldn’t take them too seriously,’ said Shota, when we were shown these swords and documents ‘as a final proof’

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by the Osseti. 'My opinion is that they stole these things, and like all Caucasians wanting an original ancestry different everybody else, appropriated the name of Alleman, although it's more likely that they are descendants of the ancient Alans, who were a white-skinned and blue-eyed race.'

I prefer to believe Shota's statement as being somewhere nearer the truth, although if you have a liking for queer tales, as I have, it is pleasant to think of these people, true descendants of the Crusaders, passing their lives away high up in the hills, 'too proud' to come down and mingle their 'Nordic' blood with the 'inferior' peoples of the valleys. This is about the only similarity these people have with the Germans of to-day.

But real Germans there are in Caucasia, Germans who do not make any extraordinary claims about being descendants of lost Crusaders. We found them in Karbadia, which is a little farther south-west from the land of the Ossetians. They are definitely German, with their neat little villages surrounded by high palisades, talking a dialect of Württemberg! They are peasants who were driven out during the religious wars or who tried to make a crazy journey to Jerusalem under the inspiration of some peasant woman who declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand!

A thousand of these pious families made the great trek across Germany, Poland, and into south Russia, but when they came to the Caucasus and beheld the riches there, very few of them wanted to go any farther, but declared that they would 'go next year'. They put up their huts and palisades and lived among the war-like Karbadians for about two centuries, and this existence among a hostile people has made them very self-centred. Shota and I, when we visited them,

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discovered them talking a curious, antiquated German, and wearing the old-fashioned clothes of Württemberg!

I am certain that had we made a more thorough journey, and not been so busy trying to trace my sister, we should have come across every nationality under the sun in the Caucasus. It might at this point be worth while discussing another curious un-Caucasian and un-oriental race I have already mentioned—the Kubachi.

Let us begin with Pompey the Great, general of the armies of the Roman Republic.

In the year 86 B.C. the Romans waged war against Mithridates, King of Pontus, the 'most capable and brave of all the Parthians', so Pompey himself said, but defeat came to him and he left the land of the Golden Fleece and fled to the Cimmerian Bosphorus. Pompey, not satisfied with the defeat he had inflicted on the king, decided to push inland and fight the Georgian kings of Albania and Iberia, who were loyal vassals of Mithridates and, not having proved the strength of Roman arms, openly boasted that they would send the men that fought with breast-shields like Amazons into the Mare Pontus.

Pompey found the tribes brave but undisciplined and unaccustomed to the Roman warfare, and inflicted many severe defeats on them until they realized that frontal attacks on the Romans were dangerous and retreated to the hills to wage a guerrilla warfare against them. Pompey decided on pursuit and carried his eagles into the mountains. Victory was his providing he fought in the valleys, and we can picture the great conqueror, standing with his supercilious face and set jaw, as he watched the defeated Georgians bringing him their barbaric tribute, 'a bedstead, table and chair of state, all of

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gold', according to Plutarch. With typical Roman arrogance he raised up a column of stone on which his victories and the names of the defeated kings were inscribed.

He then left to fight in other wars, but the story does not end there. Many years later, when the Russians were setting out to conquer the Caucasus, a Russian general decided to engrave his name and that of his army on the hills themselves, to perpetuate his victory. Said he, 'We are conquering the mountain peoples, let us also conquer the mountains themselves.'

It was a foolhardy boast, but, being a general, he could not go back on his extravagant claim. So he ordered his whole army to climb the mountain that stood in his way and there inscribe the legend of his all-conquering arms. What a tale for the Petersburg *salons*!

Inch by inch the soldiers climbed to the summit, dragging up their equipment and their guns. The general himself braved the elements and the avalanches to get to the top, and having got there began to look for a suitable place to make his carving, when lo, right in front of him, at a bare hundred yards or so, stood a magnificent wall of granite, the peak itself, smooth and glistening in the sun.

'There', he pointed to his engineers, 'you will put the name of the Tsar, my name, and the army's name, so that the proudest mountains in the Caucasus may know that we have stamped them and made them ours.'

Engineers and general advanced to this smooth granite wall, and imagine their dismay when they saw in letters a foot high the following inscription: 'Pompeius Imperator Legio XIV. . . .'

Shota, who told me this anecdote with a smile, added, 'The

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general wept bitterly, they say, and ordered that a smaller inscription should be made. "Like the Romans, whose civilization held the world in thrall, we, Soldiers of the Russian Caesar, have placed our names beneath those of the mighty conqueror." But when they told the tale in Saint Petersburg the unfortunate general blushed and said, "Why did Pompey have to choose the same mountain as I?" "

This, I must warn the reader, is a legend, and what truth there is in it I don't know, but of the Kubachi I have a different and more authentic tale to tell.

'I have already told you', said Shota, 'of the Genoese influence that may be found in the coast towns of the Caucasus—in Mingrelia especially—in the way of buildings, and even people, looking like Lombardians, and sometimes wearing the ancient dress; but these Kubachi are definitely the descendants of the ancient Romans. They have nothing in common with the Italian merchants, whose offspring, legitimate and illegitimate, will be found in the Colchis coast. These Kubachi are Romans, living under their ancient "leges". We passed them by as we went into Daghestan, for they live in a valley some miles due west of Derbend, only a handful of them, a mere three or four thousand. They are unique, because, despite the passage of centuries, they have remained citizens of an empire that had ceased to exist these two thousand years!'

I am afraid that at this stage of the journey I was prepared to listen to whatever Shota had to tell me without questioning. Before I had come into the Caucasus I should not have believed a word, and would have interrupted him consistently. But after having seen the Khevsurs with an emasculated religion that is Christian and yet is without Christ, having come across the Osseti with their boast that they are Germans, was



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I going to be surprised by the Kubachi, who proclaimed to the world that they were Romans?

‘The Kubachi are disliked. Few Caucasians ever come into contact with them, and they generally avoid them like the plague. “These men are from the West,” they say bitterly of them. “Why should they have come to the Caucasus with their boasts and their banners?”’

‘But why are these people called Kubachi, and not Romans?’ I asked.

‘That’s what the Caucasians call them. The Kubachi themselves say they are Romans and leave it at that; but they are not so sure of their ancestry, and they say that they came to Daghestan in the sixth or seventh centuries. They were “invited” by a prince to make armour and weapons for him—and the word “kubachi”——’

‘Means “armourer”!’ I deduced happily. That was no brilliant forethought on my part, as the word is in common use in Azerbaijan.

‘Right. Well, this prince left them their customs and freedom on condition that they served him faithfully. Some centuries later, about the fifteenth century, in fact, another emigration occurred, and this time they were allowed to constitute themselves into a sort of independent republic based on the laws and customs of medieval Italy, with a signoria and all the panoply of the merchant states. They lived, it appears, in complete isolation, and no records were kept of them.

‘But they are a kindly people,’ said Shota, ‘as indeed are all the mountain folk, and hospitality with them is a sacred law. They will take you in and feed you. They will even give you money and clothing; but one thing they will not do, and

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that is, they refuse to take you into the caves they have constructed around their villages. I can only tell you something of the extraordinary tales I have heard about these Caves. I myself, when I was on a mission in Daghestan—that is, I was raising money for political purposes—went to the Kubachi and said to them, “Give me money, so that there can be liberty in the mountains and that men may live like brothers.” At first they refused, but I was wise enough to realize that the only way to their purse-strings was through their hearts. “Friends, tribesmen of the Kubachi, give me money, I beg you. I am a socialist.” They answered, “What is a socialist?” “He is a man like a tribune of the people—who wants justice for the people against the greedy patricians.” They accepted my explanation and said that they were glad to hear that other tribes in the mountains were turning to Rome! They imagined that the socialists were bringing in the reforms of the ancient republic—and who was I to disillusion them. I needed the money, and they gave it to me, but the manner of the giving was strange. They begged me to be seated and then all went out of the hut. I immediately rushed over to the window to see where they were all going and I saw that they were heading for a mountain track. All of a sudden they disappeared, and later—I should say about two or three hours later—they returned, bringing me large sums of gold, all bearing the image of the Emperor Hadrian! “Take this,” they said, “and bring the power of Rome to the barbarians.”

“Coins of Hadrian’s time? Why, that’s proof enough that they had some connection with ancient Rome, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But more curious still was to find out where they kept it. I have heard that they have these deep caves in which they collect their wealth. They are supposed to be fabulously

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rich, worshipping a golden Venus and the other gods in their catacombs. Others say that they forge money down there.'

'Not those Hadrian's coins?'

'No. Or at least I don't think so. They forge Persian and Russian money, but as they are armourers, their profession is holy, and no-one can attack them for it. Quite a number of the tribes have tried to find their caves, but have failed, despite all the subtle tortures they applied. These tribes are usually punished by others for attacking the Kubachi. It isn't because they are popular, but because they are necessary and understand this old craft better than anyone else.'

'But surely there is some other proof,' I said, 'other than the coins of Hadrian.'

'A few. For example, their customs. The women of the Kubachi never wear veils, nor is any dowry paid for them when they marry, and they have even schools devoted exclusively to women. Their religion, however, is a little mixed and they worship Venus in a rather peculiar form. They have a curious custom in which all widows and women whose husbands have deserted them come to the doors of their houses between the hours of two and three in the night, and offer themselves in a sort of "sacred prostitution" to any passer-by. The women's eyes must be bandaged, however, and they must not on any account see their lovers. If they do not submit to this practice they are considered very ill mannered!'

'What happens to the children?' I asked, trying to preserve an open mind.

'They are communal property and are brought up at the expense of the villagers, all the mothers in the village taking it upon themselves to look after the children.'

Another curious thing Shota had to say about these Kuba-

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chi was their passion for art collection. It certainly seems as if the acquisition of beautiful things was in their blood.

‘They love showing off their treasures and speaking about the merits of the different pieces in their collections. They have rare carvings from India that must be centuries old, and Persian carpets on which they claim the great Xerxes sat. Their passion is so great for collecting that we shall probably see a number of them going around Tiflis, searching the bazaars. But woe into you if you buy from a Kubachi; they are the master forgers of the Caucasus, and many a traveller has been deceived into buying old armour and swords they themselves have manufactured. Genuine Babylonian, they say to some stupid merchant from Erzerum or Baku. They have businesses all over Russia and the East, and they have developed a very clever system of work—not dissimilar to that of the Swiss—they have divided their labour so that each man does but a small piece of the complete article and so becomes an expert, leaving it to the master-assemblers to put them all together.’

‘But I’m still waiting for my direct proof of their Roman ancestry,’ I insisted.

‘Well, they have a large stone engraved in the Roman fashion and they say that the Roman emperor gave it to them.’

‘That might well be forged.’

‘Quite, but on the other hand their language, which is similar to Darghi—the language of their neighbours in Daghestan—has some curious words in it.’

‘For instance?’

‘*Nussa*. That comes from the Latin *nos* or the French *nous*. Or *je*—that means *I*, both in French and in their language. Other words like *ule* (*l’œil*) for eye, and so forth.’

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‘That’s better,’ I said.

‘Another proof. Not so long ago a scientific expedition went among the Kubachi and measured their skulls. Do you know what they found? They found that these men were more like the French or the people in the mountains of Savoy and Piedmont. But strangest of all is the fact that when you ask some Kubachi his origin, he replies in his Darghi tongue, “Civis Romanus sum”. And that, as you know, was the hall-mark of the Roman. Even Saint Paul on the day of his death said those words. They, like him, are proud to call themselves Rome’s citizens.’

I laughed.

‘All that you’ve told me about these people points to their being forgers. Why shouldn’t they have invented this “ancestry” for themselves, simply to be “different”?’

‘No reason at all,’ said Shota. ‘But surely you aren’t going to suggest that they also forged the shape of their skulls?’

And so, despite my scepticism, I was led to believe that the Caucasus had found yet another lost empire to maintain, that Pompey and Julius Caesar were kinsmen of these lost and forgotten people who bow before the statue of the Golden Venus.

## *Chapter 10*

### YELLOW DEVILS

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It was of the Nogais Tartars that Brosset, the historian, said, 'Some uncouth men feeding on foul and unclean food', when he spoke of the King Irakli's mercenaries, and these people deserve some attention, as Shota and I kept coming upon them and their tents wherever we went on our way to Karbadia.

They are little men, these 'yellow devils' of the mountains, and have served in every war that has ever flared up in the restless valleys of the Caucasus. But when I met them they were tending their horses and living in their horse-hair tents.

'They love their horses more than they love their wives, Shota told me as we came across a settlement of them by a large grey stone palace, and went into the courtyard seeking admission. All of a sudden terrific yells resounded around us and a whole horde of these Tartars came riding upon us. I thought our time was up, but Shota reined in the mule and waited for their approach.

'They will do no harm,' he said. 'So many of them have been massacred for attacking strangers and stealing horses

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that they will not dare to do anything to us. They are probably trying to scare us.'

They certainly scared me as they came thundering along, hugging their horses' bellies with their legs, their caps flapping like huge bats' ears; but when they came nearer I saw that they were unarmed, except for daggers, perhaps. They whirled round us in a cloud of dust, gesticulating and shouting all the time.

This went on for a full five minutes, until Shota was able to speak above the din and demand their business, only he put it more politely.

'Sons of the Great Khan,' he said, paying them their favourite compliment, 'I and my son would rest beneath these walls. We ask nothing of you, except a little mare's milk, for which we are willing to pay.'

But the sons of the Great Khan had something else in mind. They jumped off their horses and raised up their fingers at the grey stone palace and uttered the most terrifying howls, but Shota, who could not make out this pantomime, stepped forward and asked, 'Devils?'

No-one answered, but continued to howl with closed eyes, until one old Tartar came forward and offered this information.

'Go not near to this palace of evil. It is cursed.'

Naturally, I and Shota approached as near as we could, Shota speaking all the time. He said he did not care whether it was cursed. We wanted to rest, and that was that.

'Do not look upon it,' shouted the Tartar, 'it is cursed.'

So we promptly looked. Believe it or not, the whole outer wall was made of square tombstones! Jewish tombstones! There were inscriptions and the ubiquitous star of David. And thereby hangs a tale.

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In very olden days the mountain Jews had a large colony here and preferred the civilized custom of burying their dead to the rather more crude way of the Tartars, who cut a man to pieces and put him into a sack with salt and presented the sack to the person's wife or relatives. But it happened that these unfortunate Jews fell out with their neighbours, the Nogai Tartars, descendants of the Great Khan, who fell upon them and slew them all and stole their valuables. The Tartar Prince decided to build himself a permanent palace, and, being an astute man, he realized that to bring stones from the mountains was a difficult job, so he uprooted all the stones in the Jewish cemetery and ordered his builder to make use of them. Consequently, the walls of the place were decorated with innumerable stars of David and with the names of deceased Sarahs and Isaacs! But things didn't go so well with this wicked Tartar Khan and one day he and his whole family died. After that his retainers and his friends died, also, in fact all the inhabitants of this accursed place, which included horses and dogs and pigs.

'It is a long time now that the place is empty,' said the old Tartar, 'and when we saw you coming to it, we wanted to warn you. That is all. Pay us a little for our foresight.'

Shota gave them a few coppers and said to me in Russian:

'I can't help wondering whether these cunning little devils haven't put this place up themselves simply to get money out of credulous travellers like us. But the legend is charming and they deserve the money, even if they only invented it.'

Shota had a great love for all legends, certain and uncertain, and many a time he paid money to hear some fairy story or other, saying, 'One day I shall write them down and compose songs.'



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Well, he managed to pick up enough 'lore' about these Nogai Tartars to last him a lifetime, and he would give me the benefit of his researches every night.

'Little yellow devils,' he said, 'but they once held most of the world in thrall. They have been Buddhists, Jews, and Christians in turn, and finally decided on Islam; but what does it matter to these rascals what they worship? Nothing in the world can make them pious. They are too proud! When you have Jenghiz Khan for an ancestor, they say, what is religion?'

And then Shota told me that these Nogais are a dying race, and that unless they get better pasture lands and some effort is made to preserve their language, they will pass out of man's mind entirely.

'It would be a pity,' Shota said. 'They are men, and given the proper chances they will live at peace with their neighbours.'

'But these men don't understand your socialism, Shota,' I protested half jokingly.

'No,' he said, 'but they will. The Caucasus has as many races as there are in the world. If they show the world how to live, perhaps the world will follow? Who knows?'

Most touching of all the things I heard the Nogai Tartars say was this: 'Well we know that in another hundred years we shall be no more. God became angry with us and no longer promised us life. What boots it to worry? We have had our day. We were great once. It is time for us to go.'

Their men and women are infertile and very few children are born to them, and their characters as former world-conquerors are sadly changed. I would not have been frightened at my first acquaintance with them under the walls of the

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palace built from Jewish tombstones if I had seen them without their horses. They can barely walk without this beast that once carried them from one victory to another. Their faces are thin, somewhat colourless, despite their yellow skin, and their teeth are small and weak. But their eyes are the saddest eyes I have ever seen, more like those of a cow being led to slaughter, hopeless and weary, knowing that the end is near. I think from the impressions I had of them that they are a little addle-brained, taking a long time to answer the simplest questions.

‘Where is the well?’ you ask.

‘The well?’ repeats the Tartar. Then he pauses. ‘You want water? You are thirsty?’

But he still doesn’t answer your question.

‘The well,’ you say again, ‘where is it?’

He usually doesn’t know, although he goes to it every day himself. They have no sense of direction whatsoever.

‘Go that way,’ he says, pointing in a different direction from his nod.

‘They seem like a people lost in dreams of their past,’ said Shota. ‘Do you know that they are so lazy or degenerate, poor creatures, that they can’t even feel jealous. They aren’t jealous of their wives because they know that the other Nogais are much too lazy to make any effort to seduce them. They are big cowards, these last sons of Jenghiz Khan, and people insult them and take away their sheep without the Nogais doing anything but protest. The Russian Government makes them pay twice their tax, simply because they have found out that they will do anything for a quiet life.’

All they did all day, it seemed to me, was to sit on small rush carpets and drink tea. And when they put their daggers

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on the floor, I noticed that they were rusty in their scabbards. But the Nogai Tartar himself is quite immodest in his estimation of himself.

‘We are the salt of the earth,’ he says. ‘What can you do for us?’

They have only a very primitive idea of cleanliness, and Brosset is right when he says that they are ‘uncouth men feeding on foul and unclean food’, but he missed one important thing out. These strange little monsters have a very wide range of literature, full of unwritten folk-lore, composed into songs and recitations, and we heard many of these without understanding them during the few days that we were with them.

‘What are they saying?’ I asked Shota once, but he could not help me.

‘The few words I know of Turki is not enough, and besides, their language is very mixed; but we can easily find out.’

The old friendly Tartar to whom we had given money as a thank offering for saving us from the palace of tombstones, explained the plaintive portent of these songs.

‘We remember the Great Khan and the raids of the Golden Horde. Now that all has left us—we have these songs left alone of all our wealth and grandeur. It is wiser for you if you go. These songs inflame our blood. You cannot tell what may happen.’

Apparently this singing drives them to remember their past. With tears streaming from their eyes, these lost sons of the Khan remember the broad steppes from which they came and the skulls of their enemies they carved into drinking cups, and they get up on their ponies and hare over the mountains in search of victims and glory. For one brief day they act like

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their forefathers, ravaging the countryside, and slaying all strangers they come across; but when the day dies, their strength leaves them, and they creep back like caterpillars to their tents and await the onslaught of their neighbours, furious at the unprovoked and rather theatrical attack of the Nogais. They await their deaths meekly; they who were once the Golden Horde that drove over the face of Europe and Asia, threatening to flood the earth with their name and their glory. Like ants, like men of another world, they are creeping back to their death, to the tomb of Jenghiz Khan, from which they have so momentarily escaped.

Needless to say, we left the Nogai Tartars in a hurry. We did not wish to become victims of their few hours of glorious abandon, and besides we were anxious to make our way to Karbadia—or more exactly to Kislovodsk, the ‘Town of Sour Waters’, where the great giants stand, the mountains Elbruz and Tau, the beautiful lady mountain Mashuk, from whose riven sides, so the legend says, flows the Narsan, the most famous healing springs in the whole of the Caucasus and Russia.

Some wits say that the Caucasus was conquered because of the mineral springs of Narsan at Kislovodsk. The old gouty general wanted to find a place nearer than Vichy, so the Russian army of occupation, as soon as it had driven the original inhabitants of Karbadia into the hills, proceeded to lay out gardens and build summer-houses. The land itself was given to the Cossacks, who stood on guard and saw that no-one interrupted the old generals from recuperating.

But the Karbadians were valiant folk and they resisted the onslaught of Russian arms for a long time, refusing to yield up the springs for any kind of bribe.

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'Who is this upstart of a Russian Tsar who wants to steal our springs?' they used to say, for the Karbadians are all princes whose lineage they declare goes back to Saint George. Seven noble families comprised the whole nation of the Karbadians, a people who embody every kind of Caucasian virtue. They are polite and very good liars and are only second to the Georgians in chivalry, although in their own eyes they are the cream of the earth.

Shota gave me a list of their claims to be the most civilized people in the whole world.

'They say that no one of their princes has been killed by his subjects in a thousand years, and yet these princes are all-powerful, as everything belongs to them, land, trees, cattle, jewels; everything in fact that the others have, including their wives.'

'*Droit de seigneur*, as in ancient France?' I asked. 'The lord of the manor was able to put his boot in a newly married couple's bed and stay like that as long as he liked.'

'No,' said Shota, 'the Karbadians are really not so unkind. But their princes have unlimited powers, some of which always strike me as being funny. But more strange is the injunction that everybody in the prince's presence must do exactly as he does. If he coughs, his whole court must cough with him. If he sneezes, they do likewise. And there are some situations that are more embarrassing, especially as not all men want to do the same things at the same time.'

It appears that they not only own their subjects' wealth and wives, but the subjects own everything that belongs to the prince (except, I believe, the wife!). Hence a Karbadian, if he takes a fancy to his prince's shirt, can go into his palace and ask him to change it for his own shirt. He can also eat at the

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prince's board as often as he likes, and should his eye catch sight of an attractive piece of furniture, he can cart it home with him without any further ado.

But then came Alexander the Second, Tsar of all the Russias, and seized the beautiful baths of the Karbadians and their famous breed of horses and proclaimed himself in the manner of all despots, 'Lord of the Iberian Land, of the Tsars of Georgia, or Karbadia, of the Cherkess and Mountain Princes'.

The tale of Narsan must be told. It was one of those delight-fairy stories that a simple people make up in order to explain some natural phenomenon. I first heard it from the lips of Shota when I was a mere infant in arms and it was repeated to me progressively as the years came and went, never varying, full of rich colour and sadness. In fact, it was one of Shota's most typical stories. And since we are in Karbadia, among the princely people, let us see how they betray their character in the type of story they foster.

Fair was the earth and very beautiful when it was young, and when men and women were yet ideas in the mind of God Almighty. There was no living thing upon the earth in those days except trees and flowers, and peace was on the earth, deep, deep peace. There was the sea and the land, and there were mountains in the sea which we call islands, and there were mountains on the earth, which we still call mountains.

The mountains were huge, magnificent, and lonely, but in their bosoms they held the little valleys and the hills, just as a strong man might hold a woman in his hands and not feel her weight. But in those days the mountains could walk. Their legs were granite and strong, and they could go where they wished, through all the deserts of the world, past great green

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forests and lakes and seas, and they could gaze at themselves in the waters and say, 'What giants we are!' And they also had loud hollow voices of imprisoned thunders and they were able to speak to each other over the deep canyons and ravines, and laugh together or be angry when it snowed too much and got into their toes and mouths. And they would look affectionately at the little hills and flirt with them and drop scented clouds on to them; but of all places they loved best the land between the two seas, the Black Sea and the Caspian. Here the weather was sultry and many little hills were to be found to laugh at their sly jokes and love them. All these things are forgotten now. There are only the eagles who can tell the stories the mountains told each other, and they speak with loud screeches that are terrible and unintelligible to the minds of men. There was one mountain that was loved above all others by the giants, and her name was Mashuk. She was lovely to behold and tall and proud, the most beautiful mountain in the world, in all the Alps and Himalayas, and no-one dared to come up to her and speak to her, let alone love her.

Only Elbruz the giant and Tau, his cousin, dared to look on the beauty of Mashuk and speak boastfully before her, for they were the princes among the mountains and were very tall and crowned with eternal snow. They were the chosen of the sun and the moon, and wore splendid garments of sunset and twilight and had many diamonds and precious stones, and all the other mountains acknowledged them as sovereigns and were pleased to lie in their shadows and wait for the sun to shine on them after it had shone on Elbruz and his cousin, Tau.

Now it happened that both these mountains lost their hearts utterly to the beautiful Mashuk. They took no pleasure

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in the sun or the moon, and at night their voices shook with thunder as they proclaimed their love for Mashuk and called the gods to witness her peerless beauty.

'I am Elbruz, king of all the mountains,' said the first giant, 'and I love you, Mashuk. I take no pleasure in the sun and the moon, nor in my high estate. I will give you my precious stones and the garments of light that cover me, and you shall be my queen.'

And when Tau, his cousin, spoke he said the same words.

'I am Tau, king of all the mountains, and I love you, Mashuk. I take no pleasure in the sun and the moon, nor in my high estate. I will give you my precious stones and the garments of light that cover me, and you shall be my queen.'

Said the beautiful Mashuk: 'You are a king among mountains, O Elbruz, and my heart is touched by your pleas. And I love thee.'

So Elbruz answered her and said, 'My love!' And he poured his precious stones at her feet and gave her his raiment of light.

Then Mashuk spoke and said to Tau.

'You are a king among mountains, O Tau, and my heart is touched by your pleas. And I love thee.'

And Tau did even as Elbruz had done and gave Mashuk all his precious stones and his raiment of light.

(Such, my son, are the ways of women. Beware of them. Read the Koran diligently and ask God's guidance in such a case.)

Then Tau looked at Elbruz sunning himself and preparing himself for the love-feast, and Elbruz looked at Tau and saw him doing the same.

'Ho, cousin,' he cried, 'who art thou going to marry?'



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'Mashuk,' answered Elbruz proudly, his words turning to clouds as he spoke. And Tau laughed. He laughed with a terrible voice and called his cousin a fool and told him that Mashuk had promised to be his queen.

(Such is the way of mountains, my son, even as of men. Read the Koran diligently and ask God to guide you in such a case.)

But Elbruz returned his laughter and refused to be comforted.

'She will be my queen,' he said. 'She has said it, cousin Tau. It is better for thee to make way for a greater.'

The snow melted from Tau's breast. He was jealous, and he took up the largest boulders (the size of hills) and threw them in Elbruz's face; the giant roared with pain and attacked Tau and the quarrel started in earnest.

Great rocks flew through the air and landed with a dreadful noise, so that the little hills ran away and the other mountains trembled as they watched the giants fight, while Mashuk stood a little distance away and surveyed the struggle that was waged in her honour.

'Whose art thou?' the mountains demanded.

'I am his who is the strongest,' she said.

(Such are the ways of women even now, my son. Read the Koran diligently and ask God to guide you in such a case.)

And the two giants fought with dreadful venom, with sword and lance and spear, and the whole world trembled and groaned under the stamping feet of the two giants. It was a dreadful war, for they fought many hundreds of years without pause, victory going to one and then to the other. Their bodies were riven and great streams of sweat and blood flowed from them both, and yet they still fought, and Mashuk looked on,

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ageless as only a mountain can be, crowned in her beauty, when at long last Elbruz raised his hard fist and brought it down on Tau's side, splitting him open and breaking him into five parts.

(And that, my son, is why Tau is now called Bech-Tau—'bech' meaning five in our tongue and 'tau' meaning mountain.)

And Elbruz, victorious, but grievously wounded, turned to Mashuk to claim her as his queen, and what did he behold? He saw an old woman with terrible crevices in her face, her breast withered, moss-covered, and her eyes small and bitter with weeping her crystal tears.

(Such is the way of love, my son. Nothing can abide time, neither man nor mountain nor love. Read the Koran diligently and ask God to guide you in such a case.)

Bech-Tau was dead, Mashuk was an old woman, and Elbruz was wounded in many parts.

'Why didst thou kill him?' asked Mashuk. 'He was fair and beautiful, O king.'

'It was for love of thee', said Elbruz, 'that I killed my cousin Tau. And I am badly wounded.'

And when Mashuk saw the wounds that Elbruz bore for her sake she wept bitterly, and her tears mingled with his blood. And for many, many years she wept, and for as many years Elbruz bleeds.

(The mountains are very old, my son, and they do not walk about. They sleep with their white heads in the sun and watch us, small creatures of dust, fighting and struggling for love, knowing that we too shall tire and grow old and become like them in our graves.)

But the gods, which are wiser and older than even the

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mountains, pitied Mashuk as she stood over the slain Bech-Tau, and from her tears came the famous waters that will cure the lover of his love and make the aged young again. But Elbruz stands with his riven side, looking at Mashuk as he did in days long passed, and from his side flows blood—the cold icy blood we call ‘Narsan’, and he who bathes in it shall be strong again and his beauty shall never depart from him again.

(Such is the way of the world, my son. All things shall pass, but love remaineth. Read the Koran diligently and ask God to guide you in any case.)

Of course the Kislovodsk I had known in former days had vanished. By that I mean its extravagances, its jovial lieutenants, its Karbadian princes and pretty ladies, Caucasian and Russian.

My own people had a ‘dacha’, a summer-house, on the outskirts of Kislovodsk, but when we arrived there we found it had been requisitioned to billet some White soldiers. The great clash between the Reds and the Whites had not yet come. There were preparations on both sides, and the British and French missions still found time ‘to water’ in Kislovodsk.

The first thing we did when we reached the city was to buy ourselves some new boots—top boots, I think they were. We then presented ourselves at the police commissariat and asked whether there was any news of my sister.

As my family was fairly well known in Kislovodsk the officials were obliging and looked up their books to see whether there was any registration of her name, which was not a very intelligent thing to do, but was at least a slender chance. Every new arrival had to register, but it was not con-

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ceivable that my sister's energetic suitor would walk into such an obvious trap. We decided that he was not in Kislovodsk, but thought it best to watch out for a few days. It was on the third day of our stay in this fairy town of health-giving waters that Shota was arrested and I spent the most miserable two days running from one general to another, demanding his release or at least some explanation for the detention.

It happened like this.

We were taking a promenade along a fashionable boulevard, watching last year's beauties mince along with the officers, drinking the sulphur waters in the glass-house 'conservatories', when two burly looking policemen in Cossack uniform approached and asked Shota his name. He gave it. They explained that he was wanted for questioning, and without giving him a chance to speak or to give me any instructions, they hurried him off.

Actually my position was not as bad as I imagined, and I found friends of my family influential enough to go over the heads of the hundred and one 'chinovniks' (petty officials) and allow me to see Shota in the local lock-up.

'You realize', said the warder, 'that your servant, Shota Farnavazi, is a dangerous trouble-maker? We shall keep him in here for as long a time as he holds opinions contrary to the state and religion.'

I laughed awkwardly and said that this was not my concern. He had been our servant for twenty years, and I felt it my duty to visit him now that he was in trouble.

The Shota I saw when I was brought into his cell was still the Shota I knew. I always imagine that people change after a few days in prison. In any case, if Shota had picked up any grey hairs they would not have been visible in his sparkling

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mass of white hair. He greeted me warmly and bade me sit down.

'I'm glad they let you see me,' he said. 'I have instructions for you. We must be on our way to Svaneti, to the town of Rukhi——'

'Then they are releasing you?' I asked hopefully.

'Well, not exactly. But no more questions. You'll have to go yourself to Rukhi and wait for me. I shall join you in a week.'

Now I don't want to give the full story of my journey to the small town of Rukhi in the land of the Svaneti, but I feel I owe an explanation of Shota's activities. He told me the following story.

'I'm sorry you were frightened by my arrest, but it was pre-arranged. You see, the local jail is the safest place where people like me can go and talk. The police obligingly collect all our party members there for us and save us the bother of finding a secret hiding-place. The two Cossacks were friends, and the head warder, and periodically the prisoners escape. There is very poor control of these things as yet.'

'Then you *are* a dangerous revolutionary?' I said, with that awe that one owes to the word 'dangerous'.

'You mean, is revolution dangerous? Yes. Then I am dangerous also,' he answered laughing. His large black eyes shone with so much mildness as he patted me on the back. 'There will be trouble soon. The Caucasus will flare up like a barrel of gunpowder, splitting into a hundred factions. There will be pro-Russians, anxious to bring back a Tsar. There will be pan-Caucasians, dreaming of ancient kingdoms restored, and there will be us socialists, hoping to make Caucasia a part of a great world system. That, Georgi, is all the politics a man need know.'

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'I've been taught to laugh at the socialists,' I said, 'but you're not a bloodthirsty socialist, are you? I mean, you don't want to destroy things just for the sake of destruction?'

'When you have lived in the hills as long as I have,' Shota answered, 'you will realize that there is no such thing as destruction. What is corrupt always passes away. The Persians were masters here once upon a time, and the Tartars, and a hundred other conquerors. They have all passed away because they were unjust and because they did not want to give a free life to the people.'

'But you surely believe in God, Shota?' I asked in alarm. 'Won't He bring all these things into being—without us, in His good time.'

'I don't know, but I do not believe He intended that we should leave everything to Him, otherwise there would have been no need for Jesus Christ.'

I pondered for some time on Shota's words. We were on our way from Rukhi to Khopi near the coast of the Black Sea, and were descending a steep hill. Shota spoke again.

'Supposing as we turn around this bend we were to meet Jesus Christ, Georgi. What do you think He would say?'

I confessed that I did not know.

'He would be crying. I think blood would be coming from his eyes. It is two thousand years since He died for Love and still there is so little love in the world. Don't you think you would be sad if you were Christ and you had died for Love and you found that your sacrifice had been in vain?'

I admitted that I would.

'Well, that's how I think of religion and of God, sometimes. I think that God is very dead. I have told you many tales about the Caucasus and how the Mohammedans and

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the other peoples believe it came into being. And haven't those stories always been sad?'

'Every one of them, Shota. Why is that?'

'Because I think God has realized his mistake.'

'What mistake?'

'Creation. It seems to me He was so excited by the idea that He quite forgot a number of important things. He made the world free of Himself, and that was a mistake. He made himself powerless before His own creation. He established laws that He said He Himself would never break.'

'I don't quite understand what you mean,' I complained.

Shota looked more serious than ever, and when we came round the bend I shuddered instinctively.

'No,' he said, 'there is no Jesus Christ here. But can't you see that the world would not have needed "saving" if God had not forbidden His heart to be moved by the imperfections of His creation? He left it to nature to develop man from a primitive savage to a thinking person, as He leaves it to man to develop from a thinking person to a Jesus Christ. Now, you see, I don't believe in either God or Jesus Christ, but that doesn't prevent me seeing their problems and realizing that every one of us has a duty to fulfil, and if we don't fulfil it we postpone and perhaps even prevent "salvation".'

'You've muddled me a great deal, Shota,' I complained, 'and I really cannot see how you can worry about God when you don't believe in Him.'

'Because I believe in the idea of God and I believe that every man is a god and that as a god he can change the injustice in the world without having to change nature. If you realised that the chaos and anarchy in the world were due completely to your selfishness and lack of courage, you would

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not be selfish and cowardly, would you? Very few people could bear to think that they had it in their power to "save" the world, but threw that power away because they were afraid of being crucified.'

'But what must a man do to be saved?' I asked, quite unintentionally quoting a Bible phrase.

'He must not be afraid of dying for the right. He must not be afraid of turning his religion from a thing of superstition to a thing of action. Take any religion you like, but chew it carefully. Then swallow as much of it as you can, but see that it makes your heart brave and not your conscience light. I will tell you of a ruler of Daghestan who once brought shame on the faces of cowards who were afraid to die.'

And this is the story Shota told me.

'There was once a great ruler of Daghestan who was also a prince of the Chechens and the Karbadians. He was a righteous man, and all the tribes around Daghestan swore fealty to him, so that when the Russians came to fight him the tribesmen arose and fought for the ruler, their master. But it so happened that the Chechens, who were the first people to be attacked by the Russians, were badly defeated, and they sought counsel from the ruler, who said, "Fight to the end. That is your oath." And the Chechens fought bravely and well until they were defeated again, only more terribly still, and at last they could not fight any more and wanted to make a peace with the Russians. But they had to go to the ruler, their master, and beg him to release them from their vow, and this they knew he would not do.

'But when the envoys appeared before the ruler, he spoke well of them, saying that they were brave men and that he was happy to see them, and he hoped they would continue to fight



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as bravely as before; and the envoys were frightened to tell what was in their hearts to the ruler. They went first to the great chamberlains and the courtiers and offered them money to tell the ruler that the Chechens could fight no more and wanted to make peace with the Russians, but the chamberlains and all the courtiers refused. So the envoys did not know what to do, except to go to the ruler's mother, for they knew that the ruler was a good man and that he loved his mother dearly and that he would remember the injunction of the Koran which said, 'Accursed be he that maketh his mother to grieve, for surely Hell shall await him.'

'And they told their plight to the mother, and she wept for them, and she went to the Ruler and told him the plight of the Chechens and delivered their message, and the Ruler looked tenderly upon his mother and said, "The Holy Book does not permit treachery and cowardice, but it also forbids a man to go against his mother. I shall go into my chamber and pray to Allah. He shall give me the guidance I require."

'The ruler went into his chamber and prayed for a long time, fasting, and when finally he came out of his room, he said that Allah had declared his wish to him and it was this. Allah said that the first person who spoke of this treachery to him should be beaten with a hundred strokes. And then he looked at his mother and said, "Thou, my mother, wert the first to speak of this treachery to me. Therefore shalt thou suffer a hundred strokes."

'And the people around the ruler fell back and began to weep as the executioners pulled the veil from off the mother's face and threw her on to the ground and raised their rods and gave her a blow; but the ruler could not bear to see this sight, and he fell on his knees before his mother and said, "The

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laws of Allah, the One Almighty, are made of inflexible iron, and no man can alter them ; but the Koran says that the children may take the punishment on themselves, and so it shall be that I shall take what remains of the sentence and you my followers shall deliver ninety-nine strokes on my back, or else I will have you beheaded and your bodies thrown to the dogs.”’

So the ruler of Daghestan was beaten on the steps of his palace and the blood poured from him in red rivers, and the people who witnessed this scene hid their faces and wept ; but the most terrified of all were the faces of the Chechen envoys, who went pale, and after kissing the hem of the ruler’s garment, they fled to their land to fight the war against the Russians to the bitter end, and never again was the oath given to the ruler broken.

It is by such precepts and laws that the Caucasus was governed.

## *Chapter 11*

### THE CONTEST OF THE ASHUKS

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We were just coming into Georgia from Guria, wending our way through the Zikapari Pass, when Shota suddenly fell ill. He had been suffering from cramp the whole day and his face had grown red. Moreover, he could not keep any food down. I must say that I was in a frantic state when he announced that he would go no further but would have to rest.

We had just cleared the pass and descended into the valley, and before us, some mile and a half away, lay a compact little village where we knew that we could find food and shelter. As it was, our food had run down and I could find no water; but, worse still, the evening chills were coming on the mountains and there were few good crevices we could make into a temporary home. The mules, however, were well provisioned and they ate their fodder greedily, while I looked enviously on. Shota had run a temperature and was shaking with fever.

In those days I knew next to nothing of medicine, but I was able to recognize a disease that is fairly common in the Caucasus—typhoid.

If Shota's strength had failed him so completely, I knew that he must be in a pretty bad way. He simply could not walk

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a yard, but he flopped down on the stones and lay mute, except for his chattering teeth making an eerie sound.

'Shota,' I said, 'I will ride down to the village and get help. We might be able to get you to a hut before sundown.'

He nodded his head weakly. 'Leave the gun,' he said. I undid my belt and handed him the revolver. 'In case you can't return to-night.'

But I did return. I made that mule ride over the stones at breakneck speed, and except for a couple of long slides which nearly landed the mule on my back, I managed to get to the village before they unchained the watch-dogs. I approached the first hut and stamped with my feet until the door was opened to me by a man in a great sheep-skin coat.

'Illustrious sir,' I said in Azerbaijani, 'a friend of mine lies ill some miles away. He is a Georgian and therefore a kinsman of yours. Can you send men to aid him to your aul?'

The man had taken his hand off the dagger when he recognized my earnest plea, and without waiting for any further details, which I was just about to lavish upon him, he called to his neighbours. Instantly doors opened and shut and the sound of hurrying feet came to my ears as the man seized me by my arm and hoisted me on to my mule.

'Lead the way,' he said. 'It is getting dark and we must reach him before sunset.'

So, very much like a general or some commanding officer, I led a cavalcade of horsemen as far as I could up the hillside. The last two hundred yards or so we completed on foot, because dusk was rapidly descending and we did not wish to risk the horses' feet being broken.

When I reached the place where I had left Shota he was gone. I looked frantically at the spot where he lay and then

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at the search party. They were in not too good a mood.

'Well, where is the Georgian? Where is the sick man?'

'He was here a bare hour ago,' I answered. 'He must have gone,' I mumbled, 'but he was very ill. A fever, I think.'

'A fever? The jinns must have got into your head!' said the leader of the party. 'Where is the man?'

Where was he indeed? Surely he had not pretended to be ill to get rid of me? He had spoken of mysterious assignations he would have once he arrived in Georgia, but I felt certain that he would not go away without leaving me word. Then another thought occurred to me. Had he been kidnapped by bandits? I remembered that Shota carried most of the money he had managed to collect in Baku. Worse still, was he murdered? A hundred and one questions presented themselves with terrifying vividness, and the more I was questioned by the people I had summoned to his rescue, the more depressed and frightened I became.

'I tell you, I left him here with a revolver. He was my friend. A Georgian. He had adopted me. Are there any robbers in this district?'

'We are robbers,' said the tall man whom I took to be the leader. 'Abreks you call them; but we would not rob a sick man. You are either a fool or a liar, young man, and we will take you to the aul.'

So I returned a prisoner to the village, closely guarded on all sides, and the following conversation ensued.

'Have you money?'

'Yes.'

'Enough for a ransom?'

'No.'

'Have you parents?'

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'No,' I lied. 'Shota Farnavazi was my adopted father.'

I produced all the money I had and gave it to them.

'It is not enough,' they said. 'But you are an orphan and it is sinful to turn an orphan away. Come and live with us and become an abrek like ourselves.'

I must say that I was astonished at this outburst of generosity, but the ways of the mountains are strange, and being an orphan helps one a great deal, and the mountaineers are always willing to add another member to their families.

'We have lost a man,' they said. 'He was a good robber, and you can take his clothes and his name and his parents.'

I might as well confess immediately that my adoption would have been carried out without any ado if Shota had not suddenly turned up.

We arrived at the village and found the place in a state of great commotion. Two of the Georgian abreks had apparently come across Shota lying on the stones and thought that he was asleep. They were just about to approach him to steal his purse, when he levelled my gun at them and called on them as brother Georgians to help him down to the valley. The robbers unhesitatingly turned into ambulance men and carried him gently all the way to the village, but it appears that they chose a shorter route—known only to them—and I and my rescue party must have passed them as we were going up to find Shota.

My relief was as great as Shota's, and when David, the chief of the abreks, saw our reunion he wept. He was a great, solid, handsome fellow, with arms as thick as oak trees, and a laugh as loud as a bull's, but the tenderness with which he placed Shota on his own bed, and the care with which he cooked his food, were touching.

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'And now,' he said, after he had made Shota comfortable, 'we will fetch you a doctor.'

I was considerably heartened at these words and said to Shota, 'Have they doctors in this village? I didn't know they had doctors? Perhaps he's a Russian?'

'Oh no,' said Shota, 'they have native doctors called "hakims". They are an old institution and are quite hopeless, but it would offend our host if we did not accept the services of the hakim.'

I must say that I did not behave quite tactfully when David, the abrek, returned. I said, 'Can you tell me whether there is any large settlement near by where I could get a Russian doctor?'

David's eyes flashed.

'I mean, it might be possible for him to help my father,' I said, trying to undo my mistake.

David, the abrek, sniffed contemptuously.

'A Russian doctor?' he said. 'What do you take us for? We are abreks, not perfumed Karbadian princes or merchants. We do not make our medicines out of pigs' fat. Our hakim is famous in this valley for miles around. He is not only a prescriber of pills and unguents, but a great exorcizer. Your father has probably caught some malevolent jinn through his mouth and needs some prayers—and not the ministrations of your Russian doctor.'

I hung my head at the reprimand, and I wondered whether the hakims might not have conceived of these jinns as germs many years before they were known to European medicine, but the truth is that Caucasian medicine has no such theory of germs. The jinns and demons are evil spirits that oppress mankind, and they submit to only one kind of treatment.

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And that treatment is known only to the hakim, the mountain doctor.

When David had gone, Shota said to me :

‘Don’t worry. The hakim won’t do any good but he won’t do any harm. I shall get over this illness, for I have great strength, and everyone will say that the hakim is a wonderful man. They would say that even if I died.’

‘Do not jest, Shota,’ I begged, and then realizing that I was showing my feelings rather too openly I said, ‘You know they wanted to turn me into an abrek and adopt me?’

Shota laughed weakly to himself, but before he could reply David had returned with the hakim, who approached Shota’s bed and said a prayer. Then without any warning he said, ‘Revered man, thou hast no fever. Thou art suffering from wounds.’

I opened my eyes in astonishment. Why should Shota be suffering from wounds? But the hakim was right. When he pulled Shota’s shirt off I saw the rough bandages he had made for himself. They were soaked in blood. I was horrified and was preparing to rush over to him when David stopped me.

‘It is nothing,’ he said. ‘I have many wounds myself. Let the hakim attend to your father without interruption.’

And so I let the hakim do his worst, although I could not help wondering where Shota had got those wounds.

Let me be quite honest and admit a mistake. Whatever may be said of mountain medicine as administered by these hakims, one thing must be said. They are past masters of dressing and curing the most terrible of wounds, and many were the men brought down to the aul whom I myself saw, who were wounded in so many places that they looked like sieves—shot-wounds, dagger-stabs, large bruises, every con-



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ceivable hacking and tearing had been administered to the human body, but the hakims refused to give up. They pulled out pastes that smelt dreadfully and slapped them on to the wounded man; then they bandaged him up carefully and securely, and in a week or two he would be all right. This is what happened to Shota, and although I watched the process of smearing with awe and a horrible premonition that Shota would not survive this 'primitive' medicine, Shota did revive.

'Wounds,' he told me while he was recuperating on a veranda somewhat like a stage, 'wounds are the commonest of all the ailments in the Caucasus and the hakims have had years studying them and finding cures. Look at me. I feel wonderfully strong again, although I know that the dagger-stabs were at least three or four inches deep and I had about eight of them.'

I raised my eyebrows. I hoped he would tell me the cause.

'I didn't tell you, but we had to fight our way out of the prison in Kislovodsk. We were ordered to enlist with the native armies to fight and police, and I and my friends refused. The soldiers came in with rifles to bayonet us, but they did not send enough. We got away. But let me tell you something about the hakims?'

I agreed. The subject of bayoneting live men never appealed to me.

'Well, as I said, you can trust a hakim with a wound, but take care if you've got a stomach-ache. They have a very curious and expensive cure.'

'Such as? More expensive than some of our swank Petersburg doctors?' I asked.

'In proportion, yes. The cure is expensive, not the doctor's

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fee. That's usually what you care to give him out of gratitude when you get better. But the cure for a stomach-ache is fine diamond dust, or perhaps even small uncut diamonds are given with busa, our national drink. Powdered turquoises are prescribed to women in the toils of birth, and Cleopatra's old dodge of melting pearls in vinegar is supposed to be good for the heart.'

'You don't suppose she did it to improve Antony's heart, do you?' I joked. This was an interesting explanation, I thought, of her extravagance.

'Jewels of all kinds are supposed to possess wonderful medicinal properties,' Shota told me. 'Western people, after all, have what they call birth stones, but our doctors set a great store by things like sapphires, emeralds, moonstones, agates, and aquamarines. They divided up their gems into feminine and masculine genders and for a male disease an opal is used, for a feminine one an emerald, and so forth. They have developed a very hard and fast science about these stones and the good they do. You see, in their opinion, jewels are living things like cats and mice and human beings, and they always tell children that if it wasn't for the eagles that fly high over the mountains in search of these glittering stones we should never be able to find them. The eagles have a weakness, it appears, for all brilliants, and after playing about with them in their eyries, they let them fall to earth so that mortals can also enjoy their beauty.'

'But tell me,' I said, 'what happens if a man is too poor to afford ground diamonds every time he is suffering from a stomach-ache?'

'Well, there are other things that are supposed to be just as good. The hakim, you must remember, is not only a doctor

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of medicine, but also of the law, and is therefore a priest, and he can always burn a Koran before the sick person's bedside; it is supposed to be as efficacious as swallowing diamonds.'

'But surely that must be very expensive too?'

'Yes. The Koran has to be a very good copy indeed, written beautifully and well bound, and then the spirits will get frightened of it and leave the sick man. But a Koran is less costly than a diamond, and if a man is very ill his family will subscribe and buy a book for the mullah to burn.'

'And what's all this about the gems having sexes?'

'Yes. Each gem has a masculine and feminine sex. That's very important to remember, for a woman cannot be cured by a masculine diamond; but you mustn't think that the doctors only concentrate on cures. They also have a branch of medicine that deals with the prevention of illness. One way to stop a man from being sick is to tie a piece of parchment on which incantations and prayers have been written on to his neck. It is very important that the length of the parchment should be the length of a man's foot. If he falls ill, the doctor always discovers that the parchment was not cut accurately enough and is a few inches or a hair-breadth out.'

'These hakims were learned men. It may be that their lore was foolish in many respects, but it was very wide, and to become a doctor in the Caucasus took many more years than it does in Europe to-day!

Diphtheria has an interesting cure. The hakim takes two long filaments of cotton and pulls them across the patient's bed. The threads are then burnt and their ashes cast into a dish of water. Then the soles of the patient's feet are painted with this ingredient, while a goblet of boiling water is placed at the patient's head and a red-hot needle is put into it a few

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times. The patient is then pronounced healed, and if the cure is not very apparent they declare that he is suffering from some other illness besides the 'Choking Illness', and they proceed with other incantations and cures until the patient is finally cured or dies.

But one or two cures are more reasonable. Persons suffering from consumption, bad-breathing, and so forth, are given a bath in sour milk. This is actually very successful.

But if a man goes blind then the hakim has to go around the village and find a bevy of virgins. He may examine them to see that they are such, and then he conducts them into his patient's room. The virgins dip their index-fingers into a bowl of water over which prayers are said, and then repeat this lament, as they look up at the sky. 'The sky is blue, very blue, and the heavens are clear, very clear. Why are thy eyes not clear?' This simple question by unquestionable virgins does the trick. If not, the man has been very bad and therefore does not deserve to have his eyesight.

The cure for madness, on the other hand, is a course of intensive dancing. The patient is brought face to face with a band of musicians, who play like the very devil for a week, and if the patient does not drop down from exhaustion completely cured—well, then, he's really mad.

There are other cures common to other people in different parts of the world. Take the one where a sheep is killed and a man is put inside its belly, where he steams for a while until the carcase gets cold. With children, the prescription varies. During the child's illness he is called by a variety of names, but not by his own. The parents fondly hope that the spirit or jinn will get so muddled that he won't be able to recognise his victim again should he leave it for a moment to join the

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other jinns in a daily reunion. Also if a child dies before it is given a name, they behead it and pour hot water over it. Unless this is done, the unfortunate mother may follow her infant to the grave very shortly.

But the umbilical cord deserves a paragraph on its own. It is a great healer and children often wear them under their clothes after they have been cut. Women too esteem them highly and some of them wear one to guard themselves from pregnancy. But should they desire a son and heir they will wait outside a room where a woman is having her baby, and when the child has come into the world, they will beg most earnestly and offer great sums of money, if only they can have the child's umbilical cord cut off over their bodies.

'But the treatment of diseases has something I always find touching,' said Shota. 'Take for instance a female disease like measles——'

'What, are diseases also divided into sexes?'

'Why, yes. Like the stones that cure them. Well, if a person has measles he throws flowers over his bed and room and then puts confectionery in all the four corners. The disease then goes into the corner and smells the flowers and enjoys the sweets. But if the disease is masculine, the patient puts some honeyed wine in a jar and leaves it at the foot of the bed. The disease gets thirsty, goes down the neck of the jar, and gets drunk.

And yet despite these primitive 'remedies' people managed to live to a ripe age. On an average people live to about seventy or eighty, according to sex, and this average is obtained by dividing the total of years by number of deaths; there are often quite a number of centenarians. The medicine must in some peculiar way be suited to the character of the people and

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their constitutions, and as I have said, in matters that concern wounds these people are really great doctors.

Now, of course, the Soviet has pushed its influence into the hills, the old hakims are out of work, and new doctors coming from the people return every year to the towns and villages of Caucasia. I am certain, however, that they would be the first to agree that for all the superstition and frequent failure, the teachings of the hakims in medicine was not without value to them.

When Shota recovered he naturally felt that he should do something for the people who had befriended us, so he asked if there was any work to which we could be put.

'You could be robbers,' said David with great enthusiasm. He had been much too polite to expect us to do anything for our board, but I think he had a secret hope that we would remain in the village and help to swell the number of abreks there.

'Robbers we cannot be,' said Shota decisively. 'For we go in search of my son's sister. She has been taken forcibly from him and we seek to find the abductor. But if you wish to be entertained for a night or two, I am an ashuk and will gladly do so whenever it shall please you.'

When David the robber heard that Shota was an ashuk, or poet-singer, he jumped for joy.

'God has brought you,' he said, 'for here we have a settlement of ashuks and they will be glad to meet their brother. I will take you to them.'

We had already come across these ashuks, but this was the first time I knew they lived in settlements. It appears, however, that these were a special stationary brand of ashuk who lived in their own aul and were looked after, fed, and gener-

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ally tended by the villagers. When Shota was introduced by David he was welcomed very graciously.

‘Are you from Kudsorek?’ they asked.

Kudsorek was in Armenia, and all the best ashuks came from there, it seems, but Shota admitted that he was a home-grown product. This did not decrease his popularity, however, and he was invited that very night to give an exhibition of his prowess.

To me he imparted the following information.

‘It is a long time now since I was an ashuk and I have forgotten many tales.’

He was getting stage-fright.

‘But you will come too, and the whole of David’s aul and you shall hear me.’

It seemed that this was a sort of initiation ceremony whenever an ashuk came across his poetic brethren.

‘How does a man become one of these ashuks?’ I asked Shota.

‘He hears a call. Some men choose religion and some poetry. I chose the latter. Some are false and some are genuine ashuks. In other words, the difference between a false ashuk and a genuine one is whether a man is a craftsman or an artist. The real ashuk can do more than sing beautifully; he can invent songs and tales. A real ashuk is considered very rare and given high honours. But before a man can say, “I am an Ashuk,” he must prove it, otherwise he becomes a mere singer, a mere performer, and not a poet. It is an honoured calling, and has many princes in it, although the life is hard. He travels the valleys and sings and teaches the people their histories, and in return may take whatever he can carry, be it precious stones or a sheep.

‘But how does a man really set out to become an ashuk?’

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I insisted. 'Does he sit down and write a poem and send it into a competition?'

Shota laughed. 'The ways of the hills are different. A man who wants to be an ashuk has certain ceremonies through which he must pass. He must first appeal to his patron—who is the Prophet Elias—and in his appeal he must ask for the miracle.'

'What miracle?'

'He must beg the prophet to make him into an ashuk, and this can only happen once a year at a certain hour of the night of Kadir in the sacred month of Ramazan.'

'But how does he know when he becomes an ashuk,' I said, 'when, as far as I know of Islam, the night of Kadir is unknown?'

'Exactly. That's why it's so hard. If the poet calls upon this unknown day—he may call every day of the Ramazan—and the Prophet Elias comes and offers him a drink from a crystal cup, saying, "From this moment you are a real ashuk and you shall see the whole world through my eyes," then the man gets up and calls his neighbours and tells them of his dream and he begins his songs and stories, and if they are original and good then they reverence the man and put more trust in his utterance than in that of a great prince or even a priest. He is a man inspired, a lover of men, and a poet. It is one of the greatest honours.'

'And did this miracle happen to you, Shota?' I asked incredulously.

Shota was amused at my irony. 'Not exactly in this way, for I was a Christian and we do not celebrate Ramazan, but I sang good songs and told new tales of the old heroes, and they made me into an ashuk.'



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I looked forward to the great evening, and when it came I hurried over to the aul together with David. Shota had left before us, and when I entered the large, barn-like building which was lit by pitch tapers, I saw that the whole village was gathered in a circle round the centre of the room, men, women, and children.

There in the centre were the ashuks, some twenty of them and Shota, and as soon as the 'performance' was ready to begin a most terrible noise rose from the venerable gathering of ashuks. They were quarrelling and slanging each other for all they were worth.

'It always begins like this whenever two or three ashuks are gathered together,' said David laughing heartily. 'But they will settle down.'

Despite David's assurance, I was very worried. A number of the ashuks, who were of all shapes and colours, began to abuse Shota.

'Ha, he is not from Kudsorek, but says he's an ashuk. We'll make him prove it to us.'

Others shouted more uncomplimentary things.

'Look at his clothes! They look provincial! Who'd wear a black dress when he comes as an ashuk?'

'His face is strong, but I expect his teeth are bad,' prophesied another.

So it went on for quite a time, until Shota, playing the little game, I suppose, came forward and said, 'I am a real ashuk, and to prove it I challenge the greatest ashuk among you to a combat'.

I went dreadfully white and seized David's arm.

'Do not let him fight,' I begged. 'He is ill. He is still weak. It would be very dangerous.'

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David's bull-like voice resounded with loud guffaws throughout the whole barn.

'They aren't going to fight with swords or daggers,' he said.

'Well, what are they going to use then?' I demanded.

'Words.'

Those apparently are the only weapons the ashuks use now. In olden days these duels were more serious, although they were never allowed to fight, because if an ashuk killed another he would be told that he was afraid of the other man's talent and that would be a dreadful insult. No, they had a more pleasant way of deciding a literary duel. Arbiters would be chosen among the wise men of the village; the ashuks would sing and tell stories, and the one the arbiters judged the victor was able, if he was so inclined, to take up the axe which was given to him and chop off the head of his luckless opponent.

'Bah,' said David, who had volunteered this information, 'poets are ninnys now. They dare not let their lives depend on the quality of their poems.'

Shota's challenge to the 'greatest ashuk among you' stung the old gentlemen to fury. They were all great, they declared, and they would pit their songs and tales against him one by one. The eldest was given the privilege of annihilating Shota first.

He was a hoary old man, more like the Prophet Elias himself, and he advanced a few feet in front of Shota and said with heavy sarcasm, 'Exalted one, begin'.

And Shota began. He said:

'Minstrely is, first of all, a branch of wisdom. Who said that, O wise ashuk?'

The wise ashuk answered eagerly:

'Ashot Rustaveli. Continue, O master of phrases.'

And Shota continued.

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'Divinely intelligible to the godlike, very wholesome to those that hearken. . . . Like a horse running a great race on a long course, like a ball-player in the lists striking the ball freely, and aiming adroitly at the mark, even so is it with the poet who indites long poems, when utterance is hard and verse fails him. Dost thou, O wise ashuk, understand the meaning of those words when thou spinnest thy tedious tales? And if thou dost, continue, I pray thee, the words of Rustaveli, the poet thou didst recognize because of all the poets he is the one most meet to quote in the beginning.'

This time 'the wise ashuk' was not so much at home. Shota's quotation had left him guessing. As Shota said, it wasn't difficult to say that it came from Rustaveli, but to continue it was quite a different matter.

The old man looked unhappily at the other ashuks, but they were unable to help him, according to the rules of the game, even if they knew this quotation that Shota had taken at random.

Said the old man, 'Sneer not so much, thou peerless one, but tell us whether thou knowest any more of the quotation thyself.'

This was apparently one of the recognized tricks of the poetic game, for it often happened that the challenger himself did not know the rest of the quotation, and therefore issued the challenge to cover up his own ignorance.

All the village knew these fine points of the game, and they all strained their necks forward as Shota spoke up.

'Yes,' he said, 'I can finish it, but thou canst not, and if thou admittest that, I will do so.'

So the old man had nothing else to do but admit his ignorance, although he still insisted on challenging Shota.

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Had the old grey-beard's life depended on it he would have been more cautious, because Shota gave the rest of the quotation without a moment's hesitation.

He said, referring to the poet who 'when utterance is hard and verse fails him', 'Then indeed behold the poet and his poesy will be manifest. When he is at a loss for Georgian words, and verses begin to fail, he will not weaken Georgian nor will he let it grow poor in words. Let him strike the ball cunningly and he will make his goal.'

And now came Shota's Parthian shot, which pierced the hearts of the twenty ashuks present, for Shota quoted the cruellest line of all.

'He who utters somewhere one or two verses cannot be called a poet; let him not think himself equal to great singers. Even if they compose a few discrepant verses from time to time, yet if they say, "Mine are the best", they are stiff-necked fools.'

The aptness of these words did not fail to strike the villagers, and David roared out his delight, as the other ashuks went red and white alternately.

'They've been fried in their own fat!' David cheered and clapped. The villagers supported him and mocked the ashuks who had failed to make Shota look a fool. Then another ashuk stepped forward and said, 'This ashuk is an old man and his memory is failing, and that is why we chose him to embolden this man who calls himself an ashuk. I will tell a story of a beautiful lady and let him finish it for me when and where I wish.'

The villagers looked at Shota to see whether he would accept this challenge. He did so without flinching, although my heart sank inside me.

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Said the challenger, 'Now do you tell us from whom it is quoted, "Now she has grown up with much self-will and like a falcon's fledgling begins to soar upwards."'

' "The loves of Vis and Ramin," ' answered Shota without hesitation. He did not challenge the ashuk to continue the quotation, however, and that made me feel that he was uncertain.

The ashuk continued in the sing-song voice that is considered the special voice of the ashuk and makes him very much respected, although it sounds as if he is speaking through his nose, ' "I fear that her flight will be so high that this nest will no longer content her and she will go away somewhere to seek her peers." Now, thou claimant,' he said, interrupting his narrative, 'art thou not like this woman whose flight is so high that this nest will no longer content thee and you will go away somewhere to seek your peers?'

The villagers sniggered at this quotation, but Shota was not to be dismayed. He immediately picked up the thread of the quotation and went on :

' "Peerlessness and solitude go ill together. I have nurtured her most delicately, and now she is no longer pleased with our raiment, nor our meat, and drink, although by God's help we lack not. Our power prevails not against her self-will; however matchless the robes I sew for her, she casts shame on sixty colours." '

I watched the rapt attention with which the people were listening to him, and for once in my life I realized that literature, great literature, is not the preserve of princes and priests. It belongs as much, if not more, to the people. Shota continued in a quiet voice, vibrant and amusing at the same time :

' "If I give her yellow, she says this is garb for the sick ;

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if I give her red she says that is for harlots; blue is the colour of mourners; white, quoth she, is for monks' gowns, and two-coloured for scribes. When she wakes in the morning she commands her slaves and handmaidens and demands silk attire; at mid-day she demands a dress of gold brocade, and in the evening a dress of cloth of gold; every moment she demands another kind."'

The contest proved much shorter than I expected, and the ashuks were thoroughly routed.

'You have been to an university,' they sneered, 'and therefore thy head is full of quotations, and thy education is gleaned from books. We will have nothing to do with thee.'

But the villagers laughed at the discomfited sages and crowded round Shota, proclaiming him the best ashuk they had heard in years, and according to custom every member of the village could ask for a 'request' number. So they huddled round Shota and began to fire questions at him. This was the greatest trial that an ashuk could be put to, for the diverse questions they asked would have troubled a theologian, a geographer, and an historian.

They might, for instance, ask how to cure warts, or another might be curious to know what lay on the plain of Imier (literally 'the other side'), by which they meant Imeretia, the country we had just left. Some even asked him to exorcise evil jinns, or perhaps for a good means of catching fish, and Shota had to stay up the whole night answering these questions.

The interest and intelligence of the people was astonishing and their love for beautiful speech was such as I have never since seen surpassed in any of the countries of the Near East that I have been in.

'Imier', said Shota, 'is a well-favoured land. It is wooded,

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and its open places, except for the cultivated ground, are of small extent. In some places the grape and other fruits grow in the woods. . . .’

‘Ha, ha,’ laughed the ashuks. ‘We have been to Imier and do not find it such.’

‘In that case the illustrious Wakhusti must be wrong,’ said Shota suavely, and as everybody in Georgia knows that Wakhusti was a writer of great renown who loved the land of Imeretia well, they laughed at the ashuks again, and begged Shota to continue with his quotation from such a great master.

‘The air is excellent and mild, except outside the woods, it is very hot in summer because the wind scarcely blows—but it is bearable except in certain places. In winter it is warm, and for this reason the running water and the muddy places do not freeze enough for the beasts and men to pass over. The snow, nevertheless, is great in height, sometimes at elbow, and worse.

‘Except in certain places, the woods hinder a man from seeing the beauty of the country, and, indeed, seen from the height of a mountain Imeretia seems a vast forest without any kind of habitation.

‘All plants and grains grow there in abundance; cotton and rice only are rarely sown, as is also corn and barley; but maize, on which the people mostly feed, is found there in abundance. Other grains prosper there; a single man, possessing a coulter or hoe, can grow enough to support himself and his family and pay the tax. There are no orchards, but many fruit trees bordering the vineyards, for everything grows in the woods. You find the date-palm, the apple, the chestnut, and the peach here more than in any other part; again all

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kitchen plants and melons of great size grow without cultivation. There are no gardens of flowers, but you find in the plains and in the woods quantities of lilies and of sweet-smelling roses. Mushrooms abound, and there is above all one sort of a kind of white envelope which later bursts—it is an orange mushroom, and very tasty.

‘All animals are found in this country with the exception of the camel, but not in such quantities as in other parts of Georgia; sheep with and without the fat tail, and always with two and sometimes three or four lambs; they are not kept in flocks. Wild animals abound, except the chamois and the hyena. Bees are very profitable because of their honey and their wax, which is in abundance; the honey is very good, very white in some parts, and as hard as sugar; this sort is called “kripuji”. There are many serpents and reptiles, but they are not dangerous.’

These homely details never fail to please the villagers, who often never leave their valleys and know nothing of the lives of other people. The fat-tailed sheep, by the way, is considered a rare delicacy among the Caucasians, on account of its tail. The real shashlik comes from the tail and no other part of the sheep.

It is a strange country, Imeretia, a province of Georgia. On ‘that side’ near the soft swishing Black Sea men gather oranges, while on the other they go about with long poles, says Strabo, the Roman, to navigate the snows.

This village we were staying in was on ‘this side’, called Amier, and here the great Georgian river Mtkvari begins.

‘And tell us,’ said David the robber, ‘what the learned Wakhusti has to say of “our side” of the valley. The other ashuks do not know, but you tell us, Shota Farnavazi.’



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Shota screwed up his eyebrows for a moment and I thought that perhaps he did not remember the famous passage from the great Georgian geographer. For all I know he may have been making it up.

‘This country is entirely covered with rocks. . . .’

The villagers agreed heartily with him and said how hard it was at times to make a living out of them. That’s why they preferred being robbers. Shota glanced at me to see whether I appreciated the economic reason for people like David. I nodded.

‘It is a place of comparatively high mountains, rough places, and forests, it produces reeds and lilies; it contains rivers, springs, and lakes, but few plains; cold in winter in certain parts, and with abundant snow. The country produces all kinds of grain, but not everywhere. The fruits are good and abounding. Most of the flowers grow wild in the woods and the mountains, and in certain localities the scent of the lilies pervades both the mountains and plains. . . .’

This pleased the villagers immensely. They had called their aul the Village of Lilies, and the soft perfume of them mellowed the air, so that the other native smells of shashlik and horses did not predominate.

‘And here the great Mtkvari rises, flowing with a strong current, through rocky ravines full of stones. But far, far away, below Ardahani, the river becomes peaceable and sinuous, because of the plains. It is full of fish; trout above all, big and little, abound up towards the mountains. The water here is better to drink than lower down.’

These were all subtle compliments that Shota was paying the villagers and dwellers of these hills, and I could see with what relish they were listening to them, and I knew one thing

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for certain. This was not Shota's first attempt to speak in an 'open meeting'! I have never seen a man hold people so spell-bound, and when at last he had finished, there were cries that clearly indicated an 'encore'. He had already spoken for three hours, but it was not enough. They wanted—what all Caucasians the whole world over seem to want—to hear the history of Georgia, its language, and its customs.

To this narrative we must now turn. The reader will not be overwhelmed with unnecessary detail, but having come so far on the journey, he must prepare himself for some account of a great and ancient people.

## Chapter 12

# QUEEN TAMARA THE GREAT

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'Trace the roads whereon take their departure the folk of all races, bending the yellow heel: princes, the ministers, the hoarse-voiced captains; those who have done great things, and those who see this or that in a vision. . . . The priest has laid down his laws against the depravities of women with beasts. The grammarian chooses a place in the open air for his arguments. On an old tree the tailor hangs a new garment of an admirable velvet. And the man tainted with gonorrhoea washes his linen in clean water. The saddle of the weakling is burnt and the smell reaches the rower on his bench, it is sweet in his nostrils.'

ST.-J. PERSE, *Anabasis*. Translated by T. S. Eliot.

'I shall tell you of many things that are unknown to the ashuks,' said Shota, continuing the traditional feud. 'For they can speak to you only of legends. I know the truth, for it is not written in the books they have read, nor is it to be found in the Koran or the Christian's Bible. Be not astonished therefore when I tell you that in ancient days Moses wrote in Deuteronomy, "A land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass." He spoke of this Georgian land.'

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Although Shota had warned his listeners of legends, he himself had to begin with one.

'Once upon a time men did not know of the use of iron, but used bronze, and giants came, big men who had sprung from the loins of Japhet, and brought iron swords and defeated the inhabitants of our land, of whom we know nothing. And from them our history starts. Many races came up the valleys of Rion and Mtkvari and passed into other lands, some staying here and making their homes here. Ye might be descendants of such people. But they were great warriors and they went further and overthrew the great kings of Egypt, and their descendants, who became Greeks, broke down the towers of Troy, and even the writings of the Hittites and the Babylonians came to a sudden stop.'

Shota was speaking of the great deluge of 'Aryan'-speaking peoples who overran Asia Minor and Mediterranean Europe in these times.

'Five centuries passed and the old kingdoms were forgotten. The new people, Cimmerians, Scythians, Medes, and Persians, had swept onward, carrying all before them. Only the Assyrians opposed these conquerors for a while, and new states were formed of Phrygia, Lydia, and Bithynia. In this swarming time, the races grew very mixed. It is said in the Bible of our ancestors, "Thus saith the Lord God. Behold, I am against thee, O Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; and I will turn thee back, and put hooks in thy jaws, and I will bring thee forth, and all thine army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed with all sorts of armour, even a great company with bucklers and shield, all of them handling shield. Gomer, and all his bands; the house of Togarmaj of the north quarters, and all his bands, and many people

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with thee." Thus spoke God to the sons of Japhet because they displeased him with their idolatry. And the tongue of Gog and Magog has remained with us and we speak it to this day.'

What Shota meant was that the Georgian language has roots in the primitive languages, languages that were interrupted, as it were, in a certain stage of their development. 'Agglutinous' languages. Some say that ancient Etruscan, for instance, was like Georgian, but the truth is probably that in common with the innumerable races to be found in the Caucasus, which have remained in the same stage of development, as it were, for many centuries, the language likewise represents the survival of a once widespread family of languages. Many foreign words have crept into Georgian, for instance, from the Persians, Russians, and Turks, but it has not changed substantially since the twelfth century. I have neither the intention of making nor the patience to make serious investigations for the reader into the Georgian language, but it might be interesting to the curious to know that such words as 'mama', or 'mother' or 'mère' or 'mutter' or 'mate' (as in Russian) are reversed in Georgian. 'Mama' means father and 'déda' means mother. This, it has been suggested, is due to the early matriarchal system under which the Georgians lived, and clearly shows the feminine supremacy! Moreover such words as 'mzé', which means sun, are feminine, and 'm'tvaré', meaning moon, is masculine.

'When the Persians fell under the onslaught of Alexander of Macedon and the mother of Darius came to beg at his feet, we Georgians who had lived under the Persian rule were transferred to the Satrapy of the Achaemenians, who were

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Persians, but more kindly and less warlike, and our first king was Farnavazi, from whom I am descended.'

This last remark made a great impression not only on the villagers but on the ashuks as well. They seemed to have forgotten their importance and came to the outskirts of the meeting to hear what else Shota had to say. It was possible, I thought, that they were 'taking down copy', that is, increasing their store of tales.

'This Farnavazi fought the Greek governor of Colchis, and extended his kingdom to the whole valley of the Mtkvari, but his gods were Persian and he worshipped Ahura-Mazda, the great sun-god, and he set his governors above the people and called them "Aznaurni", or nobles. Mirvani, his son, had to fight his people because they would not accept the sun-god of the Persians and preferred their own animal gods. It was a sad time, but the king won.'

In these days of dynastic battles, the Arsakids, the rulers of Armenia, appropriated the Georgian throne, and fought their subjects and the Persians, but of them a long history could be written and Shota did not even mention them.

'In the first centuries after the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, Colchis was a great district and Greeks and Romans brought their civilization there and the Georgian princes broke their allegiance to the Court of the Persians and bowed to the Roman Emperors. We must not forget that many of our old cities were founded by the Romans and that they gave us wise laws. It may have been that Rustaveli referred to them when he said, "They poured down mercy like snow on all alike, they enriched orphans and the poor did not beg, they terrified evil-doers. . . . Their tale is ended like a dream of the night. They are passed away, gone beyond the world." '

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True, history changed rapidly. New conquerors came to replace the Greeks and the Romans and the Persians. Alexander had already crossed the Indus, Attila had ridden up to the very gates of Paris. *Carthago delenda est*—Carthage was destroyed by the Romans, and the Arabs were bringing the sword and the Koran to the Pyrénées. Islam had triumphed over Near Asia. Byzantium alone preserved the heritage of Greece and Rome with their mercenary Bulgarian and Armenian janissaries. The fight between East and West had begun—as it had always begun, whenever the West grew decadent and could not fight for itself.

Byzantium, the Ottomans and Imperial Russia, these have been the contenders East and West, the Basileus, the Sultan, and the 'Little Father', each a tyrant, trying to bend free peoples under their yokes. Byzantium alone preserved the great cultures for three centuries, and it is from them that most can be gleaned about the Georgians, for they sent their travellers, evangelists, and tax-collectors wherever there were new things to see, new peoples to christen, and money to be got.

'What is truly wonderful', Shota said, 'is how we Georgians have managed to survive in the clash of all these empires; how we have not been swamped by either the Greeks or the Persians or the Turks or the Russians, let alone the countless hordes of Mongols who attacked us who stood on the outposts of the great empires of the world. We just survived, it seemed, because we were individuals and not herds. Each son of Georgia never forgot his origin, although they took him captive to Constantinople or Ispahan or Saint Petersburg.'

A parallel may be drawn between the Georgians and the

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Irish and Spanish people, who have also been constantly under foreign domination. This never seemed to change their inherent characteristics. They fought the domination, not for principles—but as a nation. If the principles appeared to be religious, well and good: but it also happened that it was a national cause. In other words, they were determined to survive as a nation, which, as Shota always emphasized, was every people's right. It did not mean that nations could not live peaceably together though, or that they could not share and appreciate their diverse cultures.

W. E. D. Allen's admirable book, *The History of the Georgian People*, contains the following:

'The sense of nation is in itself a kind of aestheticism—a form of sensual taste—a preference for one's kind in contrast to another kind.'

On the other hand, no man—or no people—of essential aestheticism, of taste, can conceive a fixed preference for a certain religious or political conception. Martyrdom is essentially a breach of aesthetics, while heroism, on the other hand, is an organ of individualistic artistry. Thus we find that the Georgians are often, indeed always, heroes and never, or very seldom, martyrs.

In this 'aesthetic irresponsibility' of the Georgians lies the secret both of their charm as a nation and of their survival as a strongly individualistic unit. The Georgians retain in a remarkable degree, both individually and as a people, the clear and gentle outlook, the free and inquiring intelligence, and the high amoral and untrammelled mind of the primitive man. The generosity, the loving simplicity, and the humanity, the animal love of life that characterizes the Homeric poems and the ancient literature of the Celts and Scandinavians,



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lights the pages of the medieval Georgian epics and declares indeed the mind of the Georgian of these days.

It is precisely this genius of 'aesthetic irresponsibility' that kept the Georgian nation together despite the creeds and governments that came and had their day and passed away.

'We have a bountiful climate,' said Shota, 'and our grapes are renowned for their sweetness, and life is not so hard for us as it is for other people. Take the Armenians, for instance.'

They were an excellent example of the 'martyr complex', a people who courted persecutions and who fought bitterly and argued at great length. They were put to the sword, or else they departed to foreign lands, where they raised themselves great wealth and obtained important positions.

'We drank and we laughed through the centuries, knowing that gods and conquerors would pass and the Georgian land would remain. But not so the Armenians. They were always ready to die for a dogma. Yet it must not be thought that we were cultureless or cowardly. Men from the West, of whom you know little, my kinsmen, with names as famous as Marco Polo and Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, wondered at our culture and our Christianity—a mere island in a Mohammedan world. They even said that we were the last of the heritage of Rome—now lost by Byzantium—and we Georgians long after the adventures of Pompey were honoured men in the city of the Caesars. Farsman the Second, whom they called "Kweli the Good", was a companion of Hadrian, who built him a statue on the Field of Mars and allowed him the unusual honour of pouring libations before the Capitoline Jove, a god, my kinsmen, ye have never heard of, but one who was as great as Yahweh in his time.'

This was in the latter part of the second century A.D. But

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when Rome and Persia shared the eastern marches in the fifth century, Georgia came under the Persians again and the sun-gods returned together with many Persian names and words.

‘But the day of disruption came for the Persians, and our own king, Wakhtang Gurgaslani, took over the satrapy and fought the White Huns to keep them away from our country. He was a great hero, and the songs of the ashuks praise him to this day.’

The name Gurgaslani means ‘Lion-Wolf’, so fierce and noble was this king, an Arthur of the Round Table whose prowess, as Shota said, is still the theme of troubadours. But the rivalry of Persia and Byzantium meant that Georgia was continually having to change her patrons, suffering invasion and all its attendant horrors. Its kings were ‘afraid alike of the Persians and the Greeks, dared not take the title of king but called themselves Eristavt Mtvari’, that is, governor.

Later, in 623, the King Stephanos of Georgia was unfortunate enough to back the wrong horse, the Persians, and Tiflis was besieged by the Emperor of Byzantium and his allies the Khazars, whom we have already met. Tong Yabghu Kagan, the Khazar general, captured Stephanos and flayed him alive, sending his skin as a present to the great Basileus.

Then came the Arabs and drove the successor of Stephanos from Georgia proper, and he sought refuge in Mingrelia. Georgia came under the Caliphate for a while, and was used as a pawn to satisfy the appetites of ambitious Turkish and Arab governors, who in their turn played off one noble house against another in order to uphold their rule. But in Imeretia the Georgians had the protection of Byzantium and continued a feud with the Arab masters, who did not care to go after

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them into the mountains, but were content with the towns that lay on the great caravan routes. 'Give us the Gates to the Caucasus', they said in effect, 'and you can have your mountains.' The Arabs set up an Armenian house of Bagratuni, princes with very clever heads on their shoulders, and these people governed the cities and the passes of Armenia and Georgia for the Arabs. They seemed to stretch out their family tentacles everywhere, protected by Byzantium and by the Caliph, building themselves fine castles and generally behaving with great sagacity. But what favoured this house, which was destined to play such an important role in Caucasian history, was the fact that in 772 the Arabs massacred the Armenian and Georgian nobles at Bagrevan, and so consolidated the position of the Bagratunis.

When the power of the Caliphs was broken by revolts of the Emir of Tiflis, who decided to set himself up against his master, Haroun-al-Rashid (the famous Caliph of the Arabian Nights), the Bagratunis steered out of trouble and managed, when all was falling about them, to seize the power the Byzantines and the Caliph had let slip; Ashot Bagratuni defeated the armies of the Arabs and drove out the Byzantines and he was recognized as King of Kings of Armenia.

He built himself a capital at Ani, and the overlords, the 'nakhars' of the surrounding territories of Georgia and Imeretia were in theory dependent upon the King of Kings, but this dependence had to be renewed by frequent skirmishes, if the Georgians were to accept the taxation levied on them. In reality the kingdom of Armenia was divided amongst the family of the Bagratunis, and there was no-one strong enough to weld them together into one kingdom, and when the Turks and the last Byzantines made efforts to regain their

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supremacy in this part of the world, the Caucasus was in no condition of unity to resist. So the kings of Ani began slowly to migrate farther northwards, out of the reach of the Seljuk Turks, and to form a separate kingdom of Kartli; but intrigues and counter-intrigues betrayed even this outpost, and in 1001 David Bagrationi (as the Bagratuni were now called) bequeathed his estates to the Byzantine Emperor Basil II, and the Bagrationis became nothing more than the Kuropalates of Byzantium, viceroys in their own kingdom.

This state of affairs lasted for many years. The rival houses of Oberlanis and other princes continued to disrupt Georgian unity, and indeed the unity of the whole of the country between Lake Van and Tiflis. More Byzantine conquerors came to subdue rebellions; more Turks descended upon them. It seemed that the lot of the Bagratid kings was an unhappy one, and we read that in 1068 the Turks came into Kaheti to the east of Tiflis and made Bagratid Aghsartani the First a vassal.

Alp-Arslan, the dread Sultan, who brought so much misery into Georgia and Kartli and Armenia, is described in the words of the Georgian annalists in the following fashion :

‘In the morning, he launched his bands and by the evening the whole of Kartli was covered with them; it was Tuesday, the 10th of December of the year 1068. Kartli being at that time gorged with corn and wine, the Sultan remained there six weeks, putting all to fire and blood. His bands passed into Arguenti and drove their raids as far as the citadel of Swerti, and an infinite number of Christians were killed and made prisoners; Kartli presented a hideous spectacle to the eye. All the churches were ruined, and the sight of the land covered with corpses horrified men. . . . It was a hard winter, and those who got away to the mountains died there of excessive cold.’

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And a few years later the influence of the Byzantines was gone for ever before the onslaught of the Turks.

‘For they’ (the Byzantines), said Shota, ‘were kinder to us than the Turks. They were Christians.’

But Alp-Arslan was murdered, and although the power of Byzantium had passed and the Georgians were alone of all the Christian races who refused to accept Islam, a new king came who brought hope to Georgia. His name was Giorgi the Second. He was a Bagratid, ruling not over Georgia proper, but known as the King of Abkhazia, and he too was defeated by the Turks and fled to Greece. Said the victorious Turks, ‘Why go to Greece when here is Georgia without inhabitants and stuffed with treasure.’

‘This was the most turbulent and at the same time the most hopeless period of Georgian history,’ said Shota. ‘But new powers arose in the West and fought the Turks in the name of the Cross for lands and glory. It was the right moment for our King David, the Restorer. In 1089 he restored in one stroke the kingdom of Georgia, uniting Abkhazi, Georgia, and Armenia into one state. The Turks had weakened the native princes and David found no difficulty in bringing them to heel while the Turks fought the Crusaders. The Muslims called him the “woodland king” because they had never heard of him, but he was a great soldier and an able statesman, so that even his Islamite subjects came to love him. “There was no one his equal”, wrote the annalists, “in weighing the actions of men, and discerning their qualities. His friendliness, his kindness, his wisdom, caused men to come together from the corners of the earth, urged by a desire to attach themselves to him. He was gracious in his intercourse, gentle in his words, stimulating in his silence; of a

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charming countenance, but more charming still in his carriage; with an attractive smile which was even more pleasing in moments of sadness, of a gracious but sometimes terrible aspect, wise in his knowledge, but still wiser in his discernment; simple in his manner but sensitive in his relations; he was gentle in his anger, gave praise in giving reprimand, and never embarrassed a man of good intent. He was haughty towards the proud and humble with the poor, and he was loved and cherished even by his enemies for his modesty and his virtues.'

Not only this, but Muhammed-el-Hameki recounts, 'He possessed a great knowledge of the Muslim religion and would often dispute with the Kadi of Ganja whether the Koran were inspired or from man.' And El-Aini reports, 'He rejoiced the hearts of the inhabitants. David and his son Dmitri visited the principal mosque each day, listened to the prayer and the lesson from the Koran; gave much money to the Khatib for the soothsayers, sufis, and poets, and allowed them pensions.'

Was it a wonder that when Shota had recounted these things to the villagers they turned round to each other and said, 'He was a great king, as great as Solomon.'

He defeated the Turks, captured the petty kings who stood in the path of a homogeneous Georgia, and extended his kingdom right and left. His position in the East grew in importance and Georgia ceased to be a country 'without inhabitants and stuffed with treasure'. The inhabitants came down from the hills and brought the treasure with them. His daughter Tamara married the Shah of Shirvan, and his other daughter Kata married the son of the Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros.

He built a huge army out of Kipchak settlers, whom he

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converted to Christianity and who were invaluable to him in fighting the Turks and suppressing his own barons. But the Turks proclaimed a *jihad*, a holy war against David and his Georgians, and sent a great host against him consisting of levies drawn from as far as Aleppo; but at the battle of Manglisi David routed his enemies and took Tiflis.

‘For four centuries Tiflis was in the hands of the Muslims,’ said Shota, ‘but that’s no reason to hate them. It is history and in history we must lose all hate.’

Even the Persians retreated before David, and he obtained Ani, the ancient capital of Armenia, and placed as governor of Shirvan a bishop. At last the Christians had stemmed the tide of the Turks, it seemed. The Byzantines were again in control of the Anatolian littoral and the Latins were in Jerusalem, while David held a country nearly as big as the whole of Asia Minor. He welded the nationalities together, and while he ruled, Georgian and Armenian and Muslim lived in peace beneath his wise government.

When he died the inevitable happened. Dmitri his son was not as great as his father, but had capabilities. The seeds of Georgian dissension were sown by the retreat of the Crusaders and the revival of Moslem power, and after a number of family quarrels, due, it must be said, to the habit of the Bagratids of having many daughters and few sons, Georgi the Third, a usurping son, ousted his rivals and ruled with a rod of iron. He did not have the sagacity of his grandfather, and very soon a whole tribe of rivals appeared, among whom was the legitimate Demna, the Oberlianis, and other barons. The revolt was not successful and as Shota said, ‘Demna was sent to prison a blind eunuch, and the Oberliani who were captured suffered loss of their estates in Armenia and mutilation.’

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The use of castration in dynastic quarrels was very effective, and Tamara, the daughter of Georgi the Third, succeeded to his throne. She was the last of the direct line of Bagrationi, and was perhaps the most beloved of all the sovereigns Georgia ever had.

☒ She was the Queen Elizabeth and the Boadicea of the Georgian people and her name resounds in epic and song to this day. They speak of her beauty as if she were alive. They always say 'Queen Tamara *is* . . .' when they speak of her, which is very often.

'She was the mother of her people,' said Shota. 'Wise beyond her years, a sage. She was a diplomat and a soldier. She was pious and gentle and just. She did what her great-grandfather, David the Restorer, had done and she drove the Arabs and the Persians from her lands and reconquered Ani, the capital of Armenia. And when the gate of Kars was open to her, she set her fourteen-year-old son as governor, knowing that she had the key to the Caucasian provinces.'

Like David the Restorer she appears to have favoured no particular race of her subjects. She used Georgians, Armenians, and Muslims alike, giving a great deal of regional autonomy to the princes, but holding an army large enough to defeat or intimidate any insurrection. And when the Emir of Ardabil attacked and fired Ani, the Armenian capital, Tamara not only chased him out of his own territory but followed him to Persia, laying waste and collecting booty to the gates of Tabris and Kasvin. Such an expedition was unprecedented in those days, and her name became famous throughout the East.

'When Georgi IV Lasha—"The Light of the World"—succeeded his mother, he changed her government and made



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it what he called "more gay". The Church which had ruled with Tamara was shocked. The old veterans of the Persian wars returned to the hills weeping because "Lasha", the Light of the World, was too fond of the wine-cups and debauchery.'

He was a vital young man, of a variable temper, bold and imaginative and very proud, say the ancient chroniclers. Revolts in the early part of his reign did not succeed, but finally the priesthood and the powerful family of Mkhargrdzelis forced the king to reform his ways, and he had to abandon a beautiful peasant girl he had married. But these quarrels stopped abruptly.

'A courier came to the court of the king and announced the arrival of a strange people, speaking a strange tongue, who were devastating Armenia,' Shota said.

'The Mongols?' guessed one of the villagers, who was an alert young man of about twenty. He had been listening attentively to Shota's public history lesson and had nodded his head at the parts he himself knew well.

'The Mongols! And for the first time the standards of David the Restorer, which had never before known defeat, were carried away in flight before the invading Mongols. They swept down on Persia, on the duchies of Russia and Kiev, and finally came down on Georgia, and Georgi took it into his head to die at this critical time, leaving his small son, David, a bastard by the Kakhian peasant girl. He had extracted a promise from the nobles to support his son, but the king's sister was instead proclaimed "King of Kartli" as her mother Tamara had been before her. She was certainly not made of the same stuff as the Great Queen.'

She, like other rulers around her, minimized the danger

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to her kingdom and spoke of supporting the Emperor Frederick II in a Crusade against the Turks. But the Mongols under Jalal-ul-din descended upon her and Tiflis was no more. Tiflis, which had become a great city of a powerful Kingdom, was sacked and pillaged by the Mongols. Gone was the civilization created by David the Restorer and Tamara the Great.

And these . . . 'ha! all conditions of men in their ways and manners; eaters of insects, of water fruits; those who bear poultices, those who bear riches; the husbandman, and the young noble horsed; the healer with needles, and the salter; the toll-gatherer, the smith; vendors of sugar, of cinnamon, of white metal drinking-cups and of lanthorns; he who fashions a leather tunic, wooden shoes and olive-shaped buttons; he who dresses a field; and the man of no trade: the man with the falcon, the man with the flute, the man with bees; he who has his delight in the sound of his voice, he who makes it his business to contemplate a green stone; he who burns for his pleasure a thornfire on his roof; he who makes on the ground his bed of sweet-smelling leaves, lies down there and rests; he who thinks out designs of green pottery for fresh water pools; and he who has travelled far and dreams of departing again; he who has dwelt in a country of great rains; the dicer, the knuckle-bone player, the player of the game of goblets; or he who has spread on the ground his reckoning tablets; he who has his opinions on the use of a gourd; he who drags a dead eagle like a faggot on his tracks (and the plumage is given, not sold, for fletching!); he who gathers pollen in a wooden jar (and my pleasure, says he, is in this yellow colour); he who eats fritters, the worms of the palmtree, or raspberries; he who fancies the flavour of tarra-gon; he who dreams of green pepper, or else he who chews

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fossil gum, who lifts a conch to his ear, or he who noses the phosphorus scent of genius in the freshly cracked stone; he who thinks of the flesh of women, the lustful; he who sees his soul reflected in a blade; the man learned in sciences, in onomastic; the man well thought of in councils, he who names fountains, he who makes a public gift of seats in the shady places, of dyed wool for the wise men; and has great bronze jars, for thirst, sealed and placed at the crossways; better still, he who does nothing, such a one and such in his manners, and so many others still! . . . ' (St.-J. Perse, *Anabasis*. Translated by T. S. Eliot.)

These were all gone before the marauding Mongols, who shot down the Georgians from under their horses' bellies with their small curved bows and blood-dyed arrows.

'But think not that the lot of the Georgians was hard under the Mongols,' said Shota. 'They were strangers, but their rule was just and the Georgians did not suffer as grievously as they had often done under their own kings and barons. They were administrators and they had picked up the manners of the Chinese, whom they had recently conquered. Their Empire was fast from the Dnieper to the Pacific Sea. Resistance they broke fiercely, but they were lenient as masters and their word was a promise which astonished the Christian liars and promise-breakers. Say the annalists of them, "There is truly reason to be astonished. To see them you would have thought that they were destitute of sense, but their wisdom and their ability was without bounds. They talked little and they never said that which was not true. Incapable of partiality under any circumstances, above all in anything which concerned the decisions of justice, they have the excellent laws established by Jenghiz Khan."'

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The Queen Rusudani fled to Kutais and retained her rule over a part of the kingdom, but at last the intriguers Mkhargrdzeli persuaded her to submit to the Great Khan and she sent her son David as a hostage to Batu. The Mongols then defeated the Seljuk Turks under the Sultan of Konia and found David Giorgishvili, the bastard son of Georgi, in a sultry pit; they took him to Tiflis and crowned him as David V.

'And then the Mongols played a strange game. They brought David V to meet David IV, the son of Queen Rusudani, and, as the successors of the Great Khan changed, so one pretender fell in favour and the other was upraised. David Narin ("the Clever"), as the Mongols called him, was Rusudani's son, but he was friendly towards his rival, David Giorgishvili Ulu ("the Big"), and finally the two Davids were returned to Tiflis as joint kings.'

This simple solution pleased the villagers immensely, but the young man who was anxious to air his knowledge asked, 'How could they rule together? Who signed the decrees and laws?'

'They both did. The annalists say the two King Davids were so united one with the other, that there are to be found charters which are headed David and David, Bagratids, Kings by the Will of God, with their double signatures, "On behalf of me, David, that is authentic, that is authentic, on behalf of me, David."'

'Bravo!' shouted the peasants.

'But what was happening while the two Davids were not kings?' asked the young man, to the annoyance of David the robber, who nudged my arm impatiently.

'What happened? Why the Mongols ruled the country

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through their governors and our own princes. It was only when they rebelled and clamoured for a king that the Mongols saw it was wiser to bring the two Davids to Tiflis. Of course, the nobles who had submitted to the Mongols had additional power, which they undoubtedly exercised, often reminding the two Davids that they were not only kings by the will of God, but by their support. They were the Mkhargrdzelis and the Orbelianis, people of Armenian origin, and they influenced our history a great deal at this time.'

But this state of affairs did not last long. David Narin, 'the clever', fearing the enmity of the new Khan of the Golden Horde, fled to the mountains to Kutais, as his mother had done before him, and it was not long after that his cousin, David Ulu, 'the big', followed him; dissensions between their respective followers, however, precluded any 'united front' against the Mongols, and the Mongols, after suffering from a similar disaster between their own khans and princes, began to flirt with the two Davids in order to get their support to their rival claims. The fortunes of the two kings varied with the see-saw victories and defeats of the rival Mongols, and in the end David Ulu died with as little authority as he had begun. David Narin fared no better and Georgia and her provinces were continually changing hands for the next forty years.

'There were no illustrious kings in Georgia, it seemed, until the arrival of Georgi V, surnamed the Brilliant. He settled the mountain disputes and managed to draw the Georgian lands together again,' said Shota. With the unerring instinct of a master story-teller, he had omitted a period of history which was really nothing but one of family quarrels, until the

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arrival of Timur, the last of the Mongol raiders who followed in the wake of Jenghiz Khan.

‘Tribulations again awaited the Georgian people and Tiflis was sacked,’ Shota said sadly. ‘Again the House of Bagratid was made to turn away from their God, and Georgi V was deposed by the Mongols.’

Only gifts of gold and *kharaj* (payment of annual taxes) postponed the wrath to come, but Timur, who was fighting in India, had to wait a long time for the Georgians to fulfil the terms of their submission, so after he had conquered the Hindus and established himself as Mogul at Delhi he sent expeditions against the Georgians, pillaging and burning and massacring the inhabitants.

‘Seven hundred towns and villages were razed to the ground before Georgi V offered submission. He sent gifts of 1,000 tangas of gold struck in the name and image of the Great Mogul, and 1,000 Karbadian horses, and a ruby weighing many carats, and much plate and rich materials. And Timur accepted these gifts and rode back to Samarkand to prepare for an invasion of China. But Georgia was in a ruined state and Alexander, son of Georgi, was the last of the House of Bagrationi to reign as king of all Georgia. But he was more interested in restoring shrines and churches and effecting great religious changes rather than strengthening his country.’

An interesting description of the Georgians of this period is provided by Barbaro, a Venetian, who had come to trade stuffs in Georgia. He says :

‘The men are faire and bigge, but they have very filthie apparill and most vile customes. They go with their heades rounded and shaven, leaving only a little heare, after the manner of our abbots that have great renewes, and they

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suffer their mostacchi to growe a quarter of a yard longer than their beardes. On their heades they weare a litell cappe, of divers colors with a creste on the toppe. On their backes they weare certain garments meetely lenge, but they stratte and open behinde downe to the buttocks; for otherwise they coulede not gett to horsebacke; wherein I do not blame them, for I see the Frenchmen use the like. On their feete and leggs they weare bootes or busgynes, made with their soles of such a sorte than wann they stande the heele and the too tooche the grounde, but the plante of the foote standeth so high that you may easilie thrust yor fyst underne the without hurtsing of it, whereof it foloweth that wann they go afoote, they go with paine. I wolde in this part blame them, if it were not that I know the Persians use the same. In their feeding (as I have seen the experience in the house of one of the principall of them) they use this maner. They have certain square tables of halfe a yarde brode, with a ledge round about; in the myddest whereof they put a quantatie of panico sodden, without salte or other fatt; and this they use in steade of podaige. On the other like table they putt the fleshe of a wilde bore, so litell broyled that wann they cut it the bloudee cometh out, which they eat very willingly. . . . Wyne we had plentie and that trugged about lustilie; but other kinds of vittails we had none.'

This was certainly a bad part of Georgian history! We shall, however, read other reports later on that would certainly have turned Barbaro to porridge, as the above report translated by Chardin, the English traveller, suggests.

At this time the world was fighting feudalism, Georgia no less. In Spain and in England the respective wars of the barons ended successfully for the monarchy, but not so in

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Georgia. The barons, the powerful families whose names are so long and unpronounceable to our ears, ruled the kingdom as fiefs of the king, but his rule was nominal; theirs was the power and the glory. The kings of Georgia were left masters only of Kakheti and not of Georgia proper. The various 'king-makers', the Jaquelis, were lords of the lands round Tiflis, and intrigued with the Persians, who again became the dominating factor in the East, shortly to be succeeded by the Turks, who entered into their great period of Islamic imperialism, and held the territories not only of the Caucasus, but of Egypt, Libya, and Tunis right up to the gates of Tangiers and Morocco.

Georgia lay in the path of Persian and Turkish ambitions and for a while managed to steer between the two rivals, giving support to the strongest with her fighting sons. But when the supremacy of the Turks came to be established, with trained armies, cannons, and cavalry, the Georgians and their allies could no longer wage an effective war, especially when every manœuvre was betrayed by some discontented prince who preferred to betray his country rather than suffer eclipse.

'Although it is said of one prince that "justice was such that not a cock was stolen throughout his domains",' said Shota, 'he nevertheless could do nothing against the Turks, and province after province fell before their armies. And it was this same prince who led the Turks against his liege, Bagrat III, son of Alexander, and watched them burn that other citadel of Georgian resistance, Kutais in the Imeretian hills. And when the last army of Georgia was sent against the Turkish Sultan, the Meskhian soldiers refused to fight because they had not been given their traditional post in battle—that of the vanguard!'



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These history lessons were not lost on the villagers. Honour is accounted greatly in the hills, and Shota knew how to bring out the moral of a story in a way that would not fail to impress his listeners.

This was the Georgian Culloden, and the flower of her chivalry went down before the cannons of the Turks. They fought gallantly and well; but the New had come to supplant the Old, and the world had to make way for the virile men of the East and their descendants, the Turks.

‘The Kings of Kakheti—as the line of Bagrationis were now known—saw that there was nothing for them to do but remain on good terms with their masters, the Turks, and the Persian Shah. By astute manœuvres they managed to give Georgia a fairly uninterrupted peace for nearly a hundred years, and Wakhusti, the Georgian historian, gives a favourable portrait of Kakheti when he says, “Kakheti was so thickly populated that a wild animal was scarcely to be found, so that Alexander (King of Kakheti), who had a passion for the chase, would say, Would to God that Kakheti were devastated in my time. I should then have game in plenty.” That was what happened under his grandson Taymurazi, who had never, poor devil, time to hunt.’

This information angered the villagers, but Shota explained. ‘He was not such a bad king, and he may have said it as a joke. The wit of the Kakhetians is notoriously queer. But Wakhusti informs us that “having learnt from his falconers that they had seen strange birds in the plain of Aloni, he went off in haste and found that they were peacocks. He wanted to take them along, but not a single falcon would take any notice of them; there was only a red hawk, which took as many as there were; they were brought to Gremi, where they

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called incessantly, which made Kakheti seem like a fabulous land of the Qapuzuna, where the sheep go.'

'Peacocks!' gasped David the robber. 'What ill luck.'

'True,' said Shota, 'on his return to his palace Alexander was killed by his son Constantine, and the country was devastated by the Persian Shah Abbas in 1616. So it seems that the king's wish that Kakheti should be devastated in his time came true only a few years after his death. But he was hunting in other meadows by then.'

'History', said Shota, 'must be studied against the background of the world. What was happening in Georgia at this time was insignificant to what was happening in Russia. A new order was coming into being to challenge the empires of the Persians and the Turks. The Russians had thrown over the Tartar yoke; and begun spreading east and south until the Volga became "mother Volga", a Russian river, and the khans of the Crimea had to cede territories right and left. The cossacks, janissaries of the White Duke, as the Moscow Tsar was called, came to the very gates of the Caucasus.'

The Georgians were not slow to realize the possibilities of a Russian alliance and ambassadors were exchanged. But active Russian intervention was on too small a scale to succeed and their expeditions were invariably defeated by the Persians, and cut to pieces.

It was at this time that Constantine murdered his father and his elder brother. He was the servant of Shah Abbas and refused to treat with the envoys of Boris Godunov, the Russian Tsar. And as Russia herself was about to witness a critical stage of history—known as the 'time of Troubles'—the Persians were able to penetrate into the Caucasus and make whatever demands they saw fit. They placed mere boys

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on the throne whom they knew to be ineffectual and weak.

But the intrigues went on and the two kings placed by Shah Abbas—Taymurazi in Kakheti and Giorgi in Imereti—were forced into a war against him by their ambitious nobles, who still counted on the support of Russia.

‘It was Giorgi Saakadze, the “great Mohuravi”, who was a “man, brave and strong, who united tremendous energy with audacious courage, but who was cunning, cavilling, distrustful, whispering always and ceaselessly interfering in the affairs of his neighbours”, as Wakhusti said, who betrayed the two young kings. He advised the Persian king to attack Imereti and Kakheti in the winter because “it was better to enter Kartli in winter so that the inhabitants could not flee to the mountains and they would have them in their hands.”’

The villagers poured scorn on such a traitor.

‘A pity, a pity,’ said David the robber, ‘that I was not living then.’

‘But surely Tamurazi fought?’ demanded a youth.

‘No. Saakadze was right,’ said Shota. ‘Many nobles went over to Shah Abbas and all was lost, but later, when summer came, Taymurazi returned with an army and fought the garrisons the Persians had left. He was a good soldier and inflicted heavy punishment on them and the false barons.’

‘I knew he would,’ said David the robber with conviction.

‘But what was Shah Abbas doing all this time?’ asked the youth.

‘He was away in Persia, but when he heard the news he was furious. He made this proclamation to the Lazghis tribe: “I want to exterminate Kakheti. Kill or make prisoners all those Kakhains who pass into the mountains on your side and I will enrich you with gifts. . . .” From Tiflis, Shah Abbas sent

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numerous bands against Kherk, to Ersto, and to Tianeti, and he himself entered Kakheti, which he subjugated by force, took prisoners and carried off the population, devastated and pillaged the churches, broke the ikons and crosses, and gave their ornaments to the toilets of his concubines. Nevertheless, some saved themselves in the strong places, among the peaks, in the woods and the mountains of the Pshavs and Khevsurs, and in Tusheti. For their part the Lazghis carried out the promises they had made to Shah Abbas. So wrote the learned Wakhushṭi.

‘Shame!’ said David the robber. ‘Shame. I have never liked the Lazghis. I will rob them and kill them to the day I die.’

Nobody took very much notice of this boast, for David the robber did not come across the Lazghis very often. They were many valleys away.

‘But vengeance fell on Saakadze. His master grew afraid of him and rewarded him for his great services in the Caucasus and the Afghan wars by ordering his execution, but he fled and raised the standard of revolt in the country he had betrayed. A few followed him, and he fled to Turkey, where he was finally executed. He was a man of extraordinary stature, and so full of strength that they called him the Bull. Without regard for his past services, he was given to the executioner.’

This seemed to satisfy David the robber. He licked his lips with appreciation.

‘But what happened to Shah Abbas?’ he asked, hoping for further bloody details.

‘Why, nothing,’ said Shota. ‘He continued to harry the Georgians, castrating two of Taymurazi’s brothers, and killing his mother under dreadful tortures. Taymurazi wandered

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about for many years trying to stir up revolts against the Persian's nominees. He sent envoys over the face of the earth—to the Russians, to the Vatican, and to the Turks. The Russians were anxious to help and indeed did much to keep the king and his soldiers in fighting order, but misfortune pursued him everywhere. In the end he surrendered to the successor of Abbas and was alternately praised, abused, and flattered by the Shah. He died a monk after many years of struggle in the cause of Georgian liberty, and he will be accounted a good man.'

To David the robber's simple mind the fact that Taymurazi died without receiving the fruits of the just was a very bitter blow.

He smote himself on the chest and said, 'How can that be? Was God sleeping?'

## *Chapter 13*

# ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

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Before we return to the Georgian kings who came after the hapless Taymurazi, it may be interesting to note that despite the troubled times there was a civilization in Georgia which, no matter what conqueror came to destroy, flourished and developed by reason of that essential 'aesthetic irresponsibility' of which we have spoken.

The very fact that Shah Abbas burnt so many churches proves that there were many churches to burn. The wholesale destruction of books and libraries is yet another proof of native culture. Our information must be chiefly gleaned from the many travellers who came to Georgia in all periods of her history, nor must he be biased by the accounts given of those who saw Georgia only in her most unfortunate times.

Sufficient it is to indicate, although tempting to elaborate, the continual reference of the Georgian Church in Latin annals. The curious might be interested to know that an English bishop, one Peter Gerald, once occupied the Roman Catholic see at Sukhum, and that many foreigners held the see of Tiflis. In 1441 a Georgian bishop attended the Council of Florence. In 1496 Alexander Borgia wrote to Constan-

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tine III of Kartli his thanks for the congratulations sent him on his capture of Granada; Isabella of Castile had Georgian ambassadors at her court. Marco Polo spoke of the Georgians as 'very handsome, capital archers, and most valiant soldiers'. And there was, of course, Barbaro, who came in the period of greatest anarchy, whose opinions I have already quoted. The following passage is by this highly amusing personality. He writes of Mingrelia this time, a kingdom adjacent to Georgia and once a province of that kingdom. I cannot read it without a smile.

'The Lords of the province of Bendian hath two walled townes on the foresaid seamone called Vathi, and the other Souastopil, and besides that divers other piles and stronge houses. The cuntrie is all stonie and baryan without any kind of graine, saving panico. Salte is brought into them out of Capha. They make a little clothe, but it is both course and nought; and they are a beastly people. For proof whereof, being in Vathie (where one Azolin Squarciafigo, a Genowaie arryved in companie of a Paranderia of Turks that went thither with us from Constantinople, there as a yonge woman stode in her doore unto whom this Genowaie said *Surina Patro ni cocon?* which is "mistress, is the good man within?" meaning her husband. She answered Archilimisi, that is, to wit, he woll come anon. Whereupon he swapped her on the lippes and shewed her unto me, saieng, behold what faire teeth she hath, and so shewed me her breast and touched her teates, which she suffered without moving. Aftereards we entered into her house, and sate us downe, and this Azolin fayneng (feigneng) to have vermyn about him beckoned on her to searche him, which she did verie diligentlie and chastely. This, meane while, the good man came in, and my com-

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panion put his hands in his purse and said Patron tetra<sup>r</sup>u sica, which is as much to say as Mr. hast thou any mooney? Whereunto he made a countenance that he had nothe about him; and so he took him a fewe aspres, with the which he went streight to bye some vittails.'

On the other hand, there is a quotation that shows the manners and distinction of the Georgians to advantage.

'The table was covered with a fine cloth and laid with taste. In place of bread they served millet-cakes. Mikiphor, the Abbot from the Sacret Mount, pronounced the Prayer of Our Lord. During the Prayer the King sat with his hat. The King took off his crown just before he began to eat. A stand was brought with silver legs covered with black velvet embroidered with gold; on it was placed the crown, while the royal scepter was placed neatly in front of the King. The King now put on a velvet hat adorned with pearls and precious stones. He partook of his dinner in the Persian manner, that is, without a table, being waited upon by Tushmadi (meat carvers) on their knees. Food was served by Safraji. The latter were dressed in Turkish caftans of velvet and satin embroidered in gold and silver. The aznaurs (nobles) wore dresses of the same kind. The King himself directed who should be served first. The food was served on gold and silver plates and the drinks in gold and silver cups. The drinks were brought from the cellars in large gold and silver pitchers and bottles. . . . Half an hour before dark, wax candles in silver candle-sticks were placed in front of the King, and in front of the ambassadors, the princes and the aznaurs. And around the buffet table, whence the dishes were served, were iron lights.

'As the ambassadors approached the palace they were welcomed by musketeers about 300 in number, who fired volleys,



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upon which immediately, guns to the number of thirty thundered from both sections of the town, from Upper Kutais and from Lower Kutais. On either side of the ambassadors while on the way to the palace, rode aznaurs on racing stallions in parade dress.'

And Chardin tells another story, more pathetic this time, when he describes the plight of the blinded king who was so poor after the Turkish depredations that he had to pawn his crown.

' "I am sorry for it," reply'd the King, "but I cannot help it; I am a poor Blind Man and they make me do what they please themselves. I dare not discover myself to anyone whatever. I mistrust all the World; and yet I surrender myself to all, not daring to offend any Body. . . ." This poor Prince is young and well shap'd and he always wears a Handkerchief over the upper part of his face, to wipe away the Rhume that distils from the holes of his Eyes, and to hide such a hideous sight from those that come to visit him. He is of a mild Disposition and a great Lover of Jests and Drollery. He told Father Justin, he should do well to Marry in his Country. To which Father Justin made answer, That he could not marry, as being under the same Vow with the Bishops and Monks of Imeretta. How! said he, interrupting Father Justin, and bursting out with great laughter, our Bishops and Monks have every one nine apiece, besides those of their neighbours.'

But at this time the state of the Church was parlous. Shah Abbas had burnt down every church he could find, even as far as Mingrelia, and is it to be wondered that Chardin found that:

'The priests of Mingrelia are very numerous; and a sort of a miserable creature that live upon whatever they can get. . . .

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There needs no more than to be able to read and say a Mass by heart, to be admitted into the Priesthood. . . . Nor is it to be imagined how the Priests are contemn'd and scorn'd. . . . Now that which causes this contempt is their ignorance, their Gluttony and their Poverty. Their Poverty is so great that they go Barefoot and in Tatters that hardly cover their Tails. . . . There are but few churches which have any Bells, but they call the people together by knocking with a big Stick upon a Board. . . . The Parish Churches are more Nasty than Stables; the Images mangl'd and brok'n and cover'd with Dust and Spiders.

' . . . The Ornaments of the Altar are nothing but a few Nasty Tatter'd Cloits, torn and atin'd with Wine. . . . But the Cathedrals are very clean and well-adorn'd. And I could wish that every Bishop had as much care of the Education and Instruction of his Flock, as he has of the Cleansing and Adorning of his Church. There are six bishops in Mingrelia, but those Prelates take no care of the Souls of their Flocks, nor do they ever visit their Churches in their Dioceses. . . . The chief employment of the Bishops is continued Feasting and Banqueting, where they are Drunk almost every day: they are Rich and go Sumptuously Habited; their Principal Revenue arising from what they Sponge from their Vassals, and the price of the Women and Children which they sell to the Turks.'

The Church was not always as bad as that, but it was rarely much better. It left great monuments in the form of churches and monasteries, but cared little for the people. The bishops of this particular century, I may observe, had their counterparts in Hanoverian England.

Let us return to Shota and the villagers, who had gone

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home long after sunset and had returned on the next day to hear the rest of his tale.

‘I will tell you now of the last of the Georgians as an independent people. I will tell you how they struggled against their enemies, and of the kings who sprang up to aid them. Let us go to the year 1763, when Irakli the Second was king. It was of him that Joseph Emin, the Armenian said, “In Asiatic camps, pitched in the night time in their irregular way, a person when wanted is not easily found, especially the Georgians, among whom no sort of regularity or order is kept; but from eight to twelve at night, there is as much hallooing and noise, as if they were already beaten by the enemy; servants hunting for masters, and masters for servants, till they find one another exactly like cows and calves in a dispersed herd; then they directly spread the table-cloths, set down the skinful of wine, eat and drink till they are full, and then sleep as sound as a rock, without watch or sentry; so that if the beasts of the fields were to come and prey on their bodies, they would hardly be sensible to pain till sunrise. The only watchful man Emin ever saw among them was the prince himself, who sat up sometimes till one, sometimes till two in the morning, with his household servants, whom one might see often half-asleep standing upon their legs before the prince, till they dropped down upon the ground, and afforded him great amusement.’

It was surprising that under such circumstances the youthful Irakli was able to defeat the bands of Lazghis who were overrunning his kingdom of Kakheti. In many ways his character had something of the character of David the Restorer. But his efforts proved in vain. Despite his hard soldiering and the remark of Frederick the Great about him, ‘Moi en

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*l'Europe, et en l'Asie l'invincible Hercule*', his campaigns were only short-lived.

Emin gives an interesting description of him that is well worth quoting, because Irakli was not an inconspicuous figure and had he been born in another century of Georgian history he might have got his deserts.

'His common complexion was black,' wrote Emin, who was by no means altogether favourable to this king, 'mixed with green; his stature was short, half an inch taller than Emin's; but he was well made and strong in bone and nerves, Hercule had been one of the greatest men living if his mind could have been turned into the path of truth. In regard to the character of his people . . . he was in every respect the first man among them, which enabled him to have command over all. He was without the least pride, stiffness, or domineering deportment which are so common to Asiatic princes, and with such a quickness of apprehension, that at the opening of every subject, he understood the whole extent of it. His voice in pronouncing words, conversing, or treating any topic, was so melodiously sweet that the hearer, without seeing his greenish brown complexion mentioned before, would have thought an angel was haranging. Of pride he had not the least particle, he never perhaps boasted in his life.'

But try as he would to remain independent, he finally surrendered his kingdom to the 'protection' of Catherine the Great, in order to escape the Persians and Turks, who were anxious to extend their territories to the limits of their former empires.

'And the Bagrationis?' asked David the robber. 'What happened to them?'

'They were a prolific family and are still among us. But they

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are not kings. They are the Tsar's pets now. Proud they are of their ancient blood, which the Romanov parvenus were anxious to marry. They have the blood of the Comenois, the last Emperors of Byzantium, in their veins. We are descendants of King David and Solomon, they still say.'

The house of Bagrationi passed out of kingship and came to the court of Saint Petersburg. It must have been hard for them to give up their flamboyant title, 'I, blessed of God, Bagrationi, King by God's Grace, Ruler of the lands of Georgia, hero of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the son of King Solomon and King David, the heir of Moses . . .' and so on and so forth. It must have been hard for them to come as supplicants to the Russian Tsar.

It might be interesting to the reader to know a little of Rustaveli, whom I have quoted so freely, and although I am not qualified to write a sort of appreciation of this great Georgian poet's work, I might bring a little light to the darkness in the average reader's mind about Georgia and things Georgian.

It should be obvious to the average reader (if such a reader exists) that the Georgians were not a primitive people in the sense that the Bantus or the dwellers of the upper reaches of the Amazons are 'primitive'. A piece of literature such as *The Man in the Panther Skin* undoubtedly is, shows a people in a high state of civilization, and although I have been away from Georgia for twenty years, I am sure that her ageless values have not perished. Indeed, I suspect that the Soviet Republic of Georgia enjoys greater prosperity and security than it ever did during the whole length of its troubled history.

Shota Rustaveli (whose first name is common in Georgia)

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was born a Meskhain, which is in a district of Georgia not far from the capital, Tiflis. As seems to be common with great men (Shakespeare, for instance), the beginning of Shota's life is clouded in legend and mystery. The exact date of his birth is not known. But one thing is certain, and that is that he received a very wide education, alleged to have been imparted to him by an uncle who was a monk. He travelled a great deal, visiting not only Jerusalem and the monastery island of Athos, but also Olympus, the home of the gods. He must have imbibed much Greek verse and philosophy, otherwise it is difficult to explain why his manuscripts were burnt by an archbishop in the eighteenth century for 'Platonism'. Scholars dispute, as scholars will, whether he lived in the reign of Queen Tamara or her father, Georgi III. But the more attractive legend says that he was in love with Tamara the Great and wrote *The Man in the Panther Skin* to her in the same way as Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* to Elizabeth. But others say he was a soldier who fought in Georgi III's wars, and often helped the king with wise advice in the exercise of statecraft.

Persian in inspiration, *The Man in the Panther Skin* is totally Georgian in the breadth of its vision and the wealth of its imaginative language.

It tells a story of Tareil, the 'Orlando furioso' of Georgia, who loved one Nestan Darejan, but she, alas, was to be married off to some potentate whom she did not love. She does not believe that her lover will let this happen without putting up a stout fight for her, but he does nothing, it seems, and she is deep in despair and fury. 'She was lying like a panther on the edge of a rock, her face full of wrath. . . .'

It is in this guise that she appears to Tariel, who later

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explains to his friend Avandil what he saw. 'A beautiful leopard, in that shape I visualize her, that is why its skin is dear to me, why I choose it as my garment.' He wears this leopard skin as a knight might wear the colours of his lady in medieval Europe.

When he finds a lion and she-panther playing in the fields he can see that they are madly enamoured with each other and he is touched by the sight; but when the love-making degenerates into a fight, Tariel becomes furious with the lion and demands to know, 'You are out of your mind. Why do you harm the beloved? Is this manly behaviour?'

He kills the lion, and then, looking at the she-leopard, he explains, 'I seized the leopard with my hand. A desire took hold of me to kiss it for the sake of Her who consumes me with a burning fire. She roared and tore at me and made my flesh bleed with her claws; I could not endure it, and killed her too in the madness of my heart. . . .'

Rustaveli understood the meaning of a mad love, and no literal quotation from the poem can do it justice. A competent translation of it has been done by M. S. Wardrop, but the music and much beauty is lost, as is always the case where a poem enters into a language and becomes a part of it.

More aptly, *The Man in the Panther Skin* is a novel. It deals not only with love, but it shows a philosophy of life where characters and descriptions are beautifully turned. This is what W. E. D. Allan has to say of it.

'As a document of the medieval mind, it is a very precious thing. It is a mirror of the soul of the Georgian of the period, who dabbled in Greek philosophy, who was sporadically devout, and who rode in wild cavalry raids across all Northern Persia. It lights for us the cosmopolitan free-thinking mind of

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the Georgian noble, his easy, sentimental sensualism, his aggressive and gallant sense of his unique superiority. We can see as vividly as though he rode past us on his "jet black" charge, clad in "Khwarazmian armour", the medieval Georgian paladin, a courageous slayer of the enemy, a daring huntsman, a respecter of the aged, a patron of the poor, chivalrous to women, a loyal friend and a great drinker, but withal, callous, passionate and cruel, ingenuously treacherous. Here is a primitive man, with a gay fatalism, a light-hearted wisdom, a smattering of Greek learning, with a craving to assert his manhood in combat and to slake his passions in beauty and barbaric luxury.'

But not all of Georgian literature has to stand or fall by Rustaveli. We have quoted from the 'Loves of Vis and Ramin'. And here is an excellent descriptive piece of Georgian literature by an anonymous writer. It refers to David the Restorer and his literary habits.

'He loved tenderly all that pertained to the Scriptures, ancient and new, translated from other tongues into Georgian. . . .

'Day and night in his comings and his goings, in his ceaseless expeditions, in his work, which was for him, without rest as well as without weariness, books—with which he loaded several mules and camels—constituted his pleasures, his feasting and his daily exercise. The moment he dismounted from his horse, he armed himself, before all, with a book, and did not quit reading it except from weariness. After the evening meal, instead of sleeping or occupying himself in some other way, he began to read again. If his eyes were weary he replaced them with his ears, and then as a listener, not distraught, but always extremely attentive, he would analyse, question, or



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would explain the value and intrinsic meaning of the Texts.'

I will cite another instance of his love of books. 'Often he would place before him and read the Apostles; when he had finished he made a mark at the end of the book, and at the end of the year he had counted the marks, by which means we found one day that he had read it twenty-four times.'

## *Chapter 14*

# THE GARDEN OF THE ASSASSINS

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When we reached Tiflis we found the city in a turmoil. It had apparently changed governments at the rate of about seven a week, and nobody knew who was or who would be in authority. When we arrived the Mensheviks were lording it, and proclaiming Georgia the centre of a Caucasian Federation. And who should we find in a position of trust but Sumi, the lawyer. We caught him by his coat-tails just as he was trying to scamper off in the crowd after he had seen us.

'By Allah, you are a slippery fish,' said Shota, letting him go. 'What is your fear?'

Sumi did not answer, but he looked so guilty that I felt sorry for him.

'The horses?' asked Shota sternly.

'I'm an official here now,' said Sumi. 'We're in power.' The last phrase was uttered almost as a threat.

'And do your officials steal horses?' Shota asked with mild amusement.

'I warn you,' Sumi said boldly, 'it will be hot for people like you here. You had better be going.'

Shota laughed aloud.

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'Why,' he said, 'in a few days the Turks will be here, then what will you do?'

'We will fight them.'

I quote this little conversation simply to show how right Shota was. The next day the Turks had occupied Tiflis and a war had broken out between Armenia and Georgia. The 'patriots' were already fighting over the spoils, which would finally belong to neither of them.

So we weren't surprised to find Sumi the lawyer again. He came dragging our two horses behind him.

'There,' he said, 'I am an honest man. I have been looking after them for you. Where are you going?'

'Persia,' said Shota.

'May I come too?'

And so we were saddled with Sumi the lawyer again.

'Fortunes change,' he said. 'One day I shall return.'

Shota grunted. 'I don't think so, Sumi,' he said. 'Fortunes can't change for ever. The Caucasus has had enough adventurers and bold kings, if you ever thought of putting the ruby crown of Georgia on your head?—it will belong to the people.'

'Huh,' sneered Sumi. 'The people! Don't you belong to the people? But you've got to go into exile the same way as I have.'

These remarks did not have any effect on Shota. And throughout the whole journey he put up patiently with Sumi's insults. I really don't know why we had taken the little Persian with us. It was Shota's good heart, I think.

I wish I could with some detail describe our journey down from Tiflis through the Caucasian passes into Persia, but it doesn't lie within the province of this book. I set out to write

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a few impressions, and not a travel book, and I must adhere to my original plan. But one thing I must describe. I must describe the Garden of Heaven in Alamut, and the place called Solomon's Throne. They lie outside the Caucasus proper, just over the border in northern Persia.

We had returned to Baku to wind up whatever remained outstanding, and say good-bye to friends. Of my sister we heard nothing. In fact, despite the most solemn promises on the part of police and army officials, I don't think very much was done to trace her. In this time of perturbation people were much too busy establishing new governments or overthrowing them, or escaping to safety like Shota, Sumi, and myself.

I don't think I need bring in my personal sentiments at losing my sister. One learnt during these times to expect all manner of disasters. This was just another one of them. I could crowd a book with personal disappointments and miseries during this revolutionary period, but somehow I feel that the sum total of them will do nobody any good, and not one star would be put out by the aggregate sorrow and tears and suffering which was endured in those terrible days. The earth is old in misery and torment.

From Baku we skirted the shores of the Caspian and went into the interior towards Takhti-i-Suleiman, the mountain called the Throne of Solomon. The legend of the place is delightful. Sumi in any case was dying to show off his wisdom and pay back Shota for some imaginary injuries to his pride.

'This is a very high mountain,' he said, 'although Shota will laugh at it and say it isn't as high as his Caucasian Elbruz. But the story of the Throne of Solomon is a story of love such as the rough mountaineers do not know. When Solomon fell in love with the beautiful Queen of Sheba, he discovered to

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his dismay that the lady did not love him. What a blow to the man who had four thousand wives and concubines! So he went out into his garden one morning and called on the birds in the trees, saying, "Birds, birds, my love is cruel, she does not love me. Go you to all the corners of the world and find the coldest place where she can lay her down." And the birds flew away, some to the Caucasus, some to the Persian mountains, and some far away over the seas, and after a few days one little sparrow returned and spoke to the king, "O king," she said, "I have found the coldest spot on earth. My wings were frozen hard as I flew over it and they have only just thawed. Go there and lay your love down." "

'And the King took his "black but comely" love and made a bed for himself on the top of this mountain, but the Queen of Sheba would not come into his bed. She preferred to look wearily at the sky, saying, "Ah me, ah me, and thou art so wise!"

'But the cold was very bitter and the Queen was clothed only in the silver nets that they affect in her country, and finally she could bear it no longer, and when the king was asleep she crept into the warm bed. The next morning, when the king woke up, he touched a rock near by and warm water spouted out so that he and his queen could bathe. And the queen loved him for evermore and said, "Indeed, thou art wise. A foolish man would have tried to thaw me, but you froze me." "

I liked this legend, but I prefer the history of the Castle of Alamut, which we visited by accident on our journey into the interior. I must admit that I myself did not climb up the rock slopes and gaze upon the rock they call Alamut, because at this time we were hurrying to get into Persia proper. We had

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run out of money and were passing through very dangerous country.

The picturesque name of the valley I traversed was the Valley of the Assassins, and a few words of explanation and history might convince the reader of the truth of the name. Sumi was burning to speak, but I preferred Shota's story and told him so.

'You Persians are too florid,' I said at the risk of offending him. 'Let Shota tell me the story of Alamut.'

'I know little,' said Shota with his accustomed modesty, 'and what I know Sumi will in any case correct.'

Sumi looked superciliously at me as if to say, 'What did I tell you?'

'But the Valley of the Assassins is famed throughout the East as a valley of terror and death. For here the tribe of Hasan-i-Sabbah reigned, sending its messengers of death to strike down the enemies of its Grand Master.

'Originally they were a branch of the Shia and they give special honour to Mahomet's son-in-law, Ali, and the holy Imans of his house. They broke away from the body of the faith when they quarrelled over the succession of the Iman Jafar. But do not think that they were a religious tribe. By no means. They were statesmen who saw the opportunities that the control of Islam gave. They were not conservers of the Koran, but its mockers; at least, the Grand Master and his Viziers were not believers. Their followers, however, believed in a diluted form of Mohammedanism, together with a number of ugly superstitions that the clever founders of the sect taught them.'

'The founders', said Sumi, 'were Persians who lived in Palestine.'

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They were Persians. They pretended that God had revealed himself to them and had given them His wisdom, and they established themselves on the throne of Egypt. One thing may be said to their credit. They pursued and encouraged learning for its own sake, and being irreligious really, they were able to practise toleration. Their followers went far and wide propagating their branch of the faith, and one day the Persian Hasan-i-Sabbah joined them and after a few years was made their Grand Master. He was a capable young man and he realized what was to be gained from making murder a political instrument. He had seen it pay good money on a small scale, but on a large scale he knew he could become master of the Islam world. Many years he had listened to Omar Khayyám and sung with him :

*Come fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring  
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling;  
The Bird of Time has but a little way  
To fly—and lo! the Bird is on the Wing!*

He certainly flung aside every garment of repentance that he ever had. That old but gentle cynic Omar had taught him that life was dust.

*Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer—and sans End!*

He called himself the incarnation of Ali, the prophet's son-in-law, and demanded Islam's fealty. It did not come so easily, he knew, so he built himself this castle in Alamut,

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promising a dagger to his enemies and the dark drug hashish to his friends—his Assassins.

Here, high up on the mountain plateau of the valley of Alamut, he made himself a garden the like of which had never before been known in the East. They say it was more beautiful than even the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. And rare flowers he put into this garden, great orchids that ate birds and smelt of death's breath, and small jasmines that boiled in the sun, and the tamarisk and orange flowers and all manner of rich vegetation. And he built alcoves, calling them by special names, and the names corresponded to the countries he ruled, for Hasan-i-Sabbah soon held sway from Persia to Egypt, including all the lands of the Arabs and the Jews. And he would summon his followers to the arbour over which stood the name of their destination, and say, 'Take this dagger. On it is writ the name of the man you shall slay. Kill him and thou shalt have paradise, but return not with thy task unfulfilled.'

And these Assassins, or Hashishin—the name is derived from the drug they took before killing their victim—went out and obeyed their lord's demands. But terrible it was that these assassins, even if they managed to return alive from their exploits, were promptly killed by Hasan, so that they might stay in the Garden of Dreams for ever, so he said. In reality he feared his own followers and preferred to renew them as often as he could.

Hasan's name was not only execrated by the Crusaders and Christians but by his neighbours and the orthodox Moham-medans, and the power of his sect died under the onslaught of Saladin, the great Arab. But none could come to the garden of Alamut. Armies were sent, but Hasan's daggers were found



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sticking in the breasts of the generals sent to defeat him. To use a modern expression, they were the 'Fifth Columnists' of every campaign, lurking as friends, but stabbing like enemies. Hasan himself became so proud of his might that he hid his face behind a veil, forbidding his followers to see his face.

There are ugly stories that say that the Order of Templars was based on the rules of the Assassins, and that Hasan had Christians as well as his Ismailians in his ranks. Only when Jenghiz Khan came to Persia with his hordes did the fortunes of the assassins and their Grand Masters change. His son, Hulagu Khan, who fought the Georgians, later sought their aid against the Assassins.

They say that the Great Khan did not fear to send his soldiers against these hashish eaters, for the doughty little Mongols had refused the temptation in China, and they scorned all religions except the Golden Horse's Tail, which they worshipped with pagan awe.

They captured the citadel and burnt the books, and uprooted the garden, and tore the Assassins to pieces by tying them to horses that rode apart, and the Grand Master of the day they tortured by pouring molten silver into his eyes and ears. They say he bit out his tongue and spat it in the face of his tormentors rather than betray the secret treasure houses he had established in the mountains. These treasures remain to this day.

Although the Assassins' nest was burnt down, and they themselves scattered, there are still tribes of Ismailians to be found in such places as Persia, north India, and Zanzibar. The titular chief of this order is His Highness the Aga Khan, and every year celebrations are held in his honour amongst

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his spiritual subjects. He is a prince without a country. But his ancestry is certainly a unique one.

Travellers who have been to Alamut may claim to have seen the famous castle and the garden, but I can say that these two 'show places' do not exist except in their imaginations. There remains nothing but the sites. There is a castle here, or rather its site, that is supposed to be more authentic than the place shown to us. We did not see it. Our worry, as I said at this time, was to get into Persia as quickly as we could and not go sight-seeing.

And the Assassins who live in these valleys, what of them, you will ask. They are a peaceful shepherd folk, lazy, fond of tea and melons. They stain their beards red and their wives are very silent and well behaved. But of their former glory there is no trace. They are too poor to buy hashish and their daggers are used in making shashlik and not stabbing the enemies of their Master, whose ghost must go abroad in the rough pasturage that was once his Garden of Dreams.

Perhaps he hears the voice of Omar saying :

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on; nor all thy Piety or Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.*

And he who was called the Master of Oblivion may reply :

*One Moment in Annihilation's Waste,  
One Moment of the Well of Life to taste—  
The Stars are setting and the Caravan  
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—Oh, make haste!*

## Chapter 15

### THE REUNION

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Saying good-bye in the Caucasus is a very elaborate affair. It is elaborate in its simplicity. There is an almost Red Indian silence and control of emotions expected on both sides. A handclasp and that is all.

I stretched out my hand to Shota, and he took it, looking me straight in the eyes.

'Allah', he said, 'be with you. God keep you.'

This double-blessing, Christian and Mohammedan, touched me. 'Allah be with you, Shota, my friend. Farewell.'

I would like to have embraced him, but I knew if I did so, tears might have come to my eyes. 'Girlish' tears Shota would have called them.

But I had barely let go of his hand, when he screwed up his eyes and pointed to a far-off hill. Both I and Sumi looked in the direction his finger indicated.

'I see a horse-man,' he said.

I saw no-one for a moment or two, but then out of the dust cloud came a stamping of hooves, and a man, standing astride in his saddle, came careering down the slope.

'An abrek!' yelled Shota, immediately trimming his gun

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and bringing it up to his shoulder. 'A horse-thief! A town-bandit!'

I hastily pushed the gun away from Shota's shoulder. 'Don't fire,' I said. 'He must have a reason for risking his life within range of your gun.'

The abrek and his nag pulled up abruptly before us. He sprang off the saddle and ran forward. 'Don't shoot, don't shoot,' he begged. 'I have found her.'

'Found whom, you miserable wretch? Spit of an evil genie!' Shota upbraided him. 'Speak up, you piddling sneak-thief!'

'I have found her. I've found your sister.' The abrek breathed heavily, gazing at me. 'In the Kutais village with the Prince Abrek. Thank me and rejoice that I took a liking to the young master of far-off lands, and to Shota the Georgian?'

Shota was still hesitating whether or not to shoot out the little bandit's brains, but I warned him.

'Enough of this. Can you take me to her, master abrek?'

'I can and gladly. But tell him to put away his gun.' Shota laughed and fixed his weapon to his saddle.

'He thinks you will give him a reward,' Sumi broke in sullenly.

'I will give him gold only when I see my sister face to face. How many miles is she?'

'Not far. We will ride up the hill I came and then down a valley. The abrek took her to his palace, and what a palace it is!'

We started off immediately.

'You see, I spent all my money for raiment to go to the house of such an illustrious prince,' he said cunningly. 'I

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knew I could succeed where you two had failed. He would have set his kinsmen to kill you, but I am a fellow abrek and he listens to me. He awaits your coming and is willing to pay you the price of marriage and indemnity.'

'And you hope to make something on the transaction,' said Shota bitterly. 'I have suspicions that you knew this abrek's hiding place, but refused to reveal it before to-day.'

That was probably the case, but I was not prepared to argue. I travelled silently, while Shota and Sumi poured their full scorn on the head of the little Georgian.

We travelled all night, and at break of day we reached the head of the little village—the palace of the 'great' prince.

A more miserable collection of huts cannot be imagined. And the place was nothing more than a hamlet. The abrek had certainly been lying to create an impression. I knew enough of the mountains to realize that the abreks never made a home unless it is high up in the crags, where it is difficult to inflict vengeance on them. This was probably a temporary dwelling, one they had stolen or perhaps merely found—the original inhabitants had probably been murdered or had gone to a more fruitful valley.

We were welcomed into the house of my sister's captor with great ceremony. Stolen plate—stolen it certainly was, for its monomark was that of a former Russian general who had been ambushed and killed—this plate was spread before us and great heaps of rice and mutton laid upon it. We first ate and then I was brought to my sister.

I looked at her anxiously as soon as we had embraced. She was crying bitterly but when I asked her if she had been ill-treated, she replied in the negative.

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'I am very happy,' she said. 'He is a man of honour and although he stole me away, he awaits your permission before he marries me.'

I was surprised, but not offended. Caucasian gallantries are curious, and what appears on the surface to be sheer villainy is in reality a demonstration of childish spirit of adventure, the sort of adventure we of the West may never appreciate. But she was happy! So what could I do?

'You want to marry him?' I asked.

She blushed. She looked very attractive in the native pantaloons, small coat, and the yashmak, which she had taken down in my presence. 'Yes,' she said. 'I love him.'

Shota drew me aside, sternly.

'She is only a girl,' he said. 'What does she understand of mountain honour? You must fight the man and kill him. That is your duty.'

'But surely . . .' I protested.

'That is your duty.'

I was tempted to smile at this inexorable law, and ignore it, but Shota warned me.

'If you do not fight, his relatives will kill you. They will think you a weakling and the earth well rid of you.'

The idea of crossing swords or aiming a pistol at the man my sister loved was not to my taste, but I knew that the comic-opera traditions had to be observed if I did not want a bullet through my head on my return journey.

'How do we fight?' I asked.

'You can choose. You can either disappear into the hills and come out at dark and try to shoot him, or you can fight with a gun here and now. I shall watch for you and see that no one of his relatives tries to pick you off as you fight. I will

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warn them with the vengeance of my tribe, for you are my adopted son.'

'All right,' I said, 'make your arrangements.'

Shota immediately became important. He went and spoke with the abrek prince and his relatives and it was agreed that he should meet me on the field of honour in an hour. My sister knew nothing of what was happening. Women are not told men's affairs, even when they plot to kill each other.

I had plans of my own, however, foolish and generous as they seemed to me, but I decided to abide by them. I knew that I could not slay the man my sister loved just to satisfy some mountain law. Shoot I would. I had to. But no-one could dictate my aim.

So when we were placed out and given a couple of heavy flint-locks and the word was given to fire, I raised my pistol above his head and aimed at a far-off star—the morning star, which was just fading at the approach of day.

I saw him raise his gun at the same time to a level that I thought would shoot straight through my heart. I closed my eyes and said my prayers silently. Two shots echoed in the air. I opened my eyes and saw that he had aimed at a flying sparrow. We both missed each other—and he the bird as well. But honour was satisfied.

My sister had heard the shots and ran out—thinking no doubt that one of us was slain. Finding both of us in perfect health, she embraced her Prince Abrek and then dragged him along to me. 'Fools!' he cried.

We clasped hands and bowed to each other. The relatives and Shota fired off their guns into the air and whooped. The ceremony of blood-feud was over.

'What do I do now?' I asked Shota.

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‘You give your sister in marriage and receive the sum of indemnity.’

I suddenly found our friend, the little abrek, at my elbow.

‘Don’t forget I found her,’ he said in a high-pitched voice.

‘Give the indemnity to this man—but only a half—the rest to Shota.’

Shota waved away my offer. ‘Give it all to the abrek—may it choke him.’

The good-bye to my sister was sad, but as I could not remain with the abreks for ever, I had nothing but to tear myself away from her embraces, and follow Shota out of the valley. I left her to the mountains and their laws. One law I knew would guard her. The abrek loved her and she loved him.



## *Chapter 16*

### FAREWELL TO SHOTA

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'Well,' said Shota when he reached Kasvin, 'here we are in Persia, and I must go back.'

'Go back?' I cried in alarm. 'What for?'

Shota did not reply. I ventured a guess.

'Not for my sister, is it, Shota? Not because of her? We've done everything we can. Don't go. Sumi says it's dangerous.'

It may be dangerous for Sumi,' Shota said, 'but I'm going back. I only came thus far to see you over the border safely among friends. There are many Russians in Kasvin. You do not need me any more.'

'But I do, Shota,' I protested. What was he saying? Was he afraid that he would not be welcome among the refugees? 'We will go away,' I said, 'perhaps to Bulgaria, perhaps even to France or Italy. Come with me?'

'What use would I be there?' said Shota. 'I am an old man and I do not want to go travelling.'

Sumi looked cunningly at Shota and winked at me. I did not like his grin.

'What's the matter with you?' I said.

'I'm amused at his excuses,' said the lawyer.

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'They are not excuses. I must go back, Georgi. I may be needed.'

'By whom? Have you a family? Have you any reason to go back—especially in these times when everybody seems to be killing their neighbours and squabbling over their politics?'

'No,' said Shota, 'those are not reasons.' Then he pointed to the distant mountains. 'Beyond those hills lies Elbruz. There, Caucasian liberty is being born again. I must return and help in that freedom. You see, I am still a primitive man. I believe that a man must die fighting for the things he cherishes. With you it's different. You have not seen your goal. When you do you will understand.'

There was nothing to be done. I had suspected all along that parting would come sooner or later. Shota's journey through the hills with me had many purposes, one of which was undoubtedly to find supporters. It may be of small interest that after Shota's return he was appointed to the command of one of the hill guards that harried the Armies of Intervention and the White forces. And later, after I had been some months in Persia, I received news from Sumi to say that Shota had died fighting.

I did not visit the Caucasus again. My goal lay elsewhere, but I know that so long as the hills stand men like Shota will be born and will die for a cause that is the World's cause—Freedom.







